With this

RS McKenzie

WITH THIS RING



RS MCKENZIE

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CONTENT AND TRIGGER WARNINGS

Please be aware that this is a work of fiction. Suspend disbelief, as some of the things that take place in this book may be outside of the realm of possibility. This is a dark themed book, so the triggers will be on the darker side. Join in on this adventure with Carter and Kaison and have great time, cool? Cool.

Trigger and Content Warnings:

Sharing

Light BDSM play

Exhibitionism

Homophobia (no slurs used and not between MCs)

Murder (0n and off page)

Torture (on and off page)

Blood

Gore

Violence (the main MCs beat the shit out of each other a few times)

Strong language

Strong sexual content

CHAPTER 1



CARTER

ven though my dad told me we had a meeting, he makes me wait in his outer office like some sort of asshole. I'm sure it's because I don't have on a suit. He has cameras placed in the corners of the room, so he knows I came to work 'out of uniform.'

I flick my wrist up, checking the time on my Patek Philippe. Two fifty. He told me to come see him at two thirty. I scowl at his office door, trying to incinerate it with my gaze. He's probably not doing anything in his office, probably fucking off knowing I'm waiting on him.

Getting to my feet, I walk behind his receptionist's desk and stare into the small device that I know is a mini camera. "Anytime you're ready, Dad. Some of us need to get to work."

Gavin, my best friend and bodyguard, chuckles lightly. "Dominic will give you shit for that."

"Let him," I say under my breath, walking back over to the seat I just vacated.

My dad's office door opens, and he steps out, buttoning his jacket. "Carter. You're late."

I barely keep a growl to myself. "I've been here for half an hour. I know you knew that, since Brenda called you when I arrived." I incline my head to Brenda, whose dark brown cheeks redden under scrutiny from my father. She ducks her head, her small braids tumbling forward to hide her face.

Dad simply grunts and motions into his office. I give Gavin a look that makes him swallow a chuckle and step into Dad's office. We take a seat in

chairs in front of his desk.

A look of irritation crosses Dad's face when he takes in my attire. He tells me to dress to impress in suits, slacks and loafers that pinch my toes. That ain't me. But I think I look good in my dove gray v-neck shirt, black chinos and heavy combat boots. It ensures no one fucks with me. That coupled with the tattoos covering every part of my body visible except my face and people steer clear.

"Would it kill ya to wear a suit? Just once?" he asks.

I shrug. "It might."

He scowls at me. "Don't be a smart ass, Carter. Or I'll stick your brother with this gig when I retire."

He's been threatening to make my little brother head of the family if I don't shape up. I've been telling him to do it for years, but he won't bite. It isn't like Declan wants the job. He's content to shoot people when Dad orders it. But I'm just talking shit. I rebel against my father when it comes to how I dress, but I hang on his every word when it comes to running all the casinos, as well as running the Whitlock family. That includes our guns and drug trafficking.

Deciding to lay off so I can leave here sooner, I cross my arms over my chest. "What do you need, Dad? I got the Colombians in an hour for their shipment of heroin. They're willing to pay double for the rush I had to put on it."

Instead of the dollar signs I expect to see dancing behind my father's eyes, they turn serious. "I'm hearing whispers in the streets, Car. Whispers of impending trouble. Someone wants what we got and will cause bloodshed to get it."

I sit up straight, all signs of fucking with my dad gone. "Who? The St. Clair Family?"

I hate that fucking family. Growing up, Kai St. Clair has been the bane of my existence. The cocky little shit liked to rub it in when his father got a contract for a building project over mine or when one of their casinos got more recognition and had a better bottom line. I've tried to beat his face in more times than I can count, only stopping to avoid a war. If I killed him, the St. Clair family would come down on us hard. There would be no telling who would survive the crossfire.

But if there are threats being lobbed, I can take Kai out myself. And it would be my fucking pleasure.

Dad bursts my bubble though. "Nah. They're...not involved." I note the pause, but he continues talking before I can ask about it. "They're getting threats as well. Someone is on the warpath, after both of our families. I'm not sure who it is. Maybe the Dominicans. Maybe the Colombians."

"Not the Colombians," I say, thinking out loud. "We do business with them often and their family has expanded because of it. I just talked to Dante a few weeks ago and everything was all good. We're using their cargo liners to bring in our heroin. If they wanted war, they would have dumped or stolen our product. That would have cut us off from our supply and pissed off our customers, so they'd go elsewhere."

"I agree," Dad says after a few beats. "That leaves the Dominicans, the Russians, and the New York outfit. I need to know who it is, and I need them fucking dead. Wipe the whole fucking family out."

"It could be the St. Clair's," I say, even though he shut that down. "They want what we have. They could be making threats and see what we do about it. It makes us look weak if we do nothing and if we look weak, other families will try us. They could be lying about getting threats to get you to drop your guard."

Dad gives me a scathing look. "Did you hear me when I said they're not involved?" I open my mouth, ready to give a good argument, but he slashes his hand through the air. My mouth clamps shut, and I sit back and huff. "They. Are. Not. Involved."

Sighing again, I nod. "Okay. So, the Reyes', the Petrov's and the Fensters' could be behind the threats. Anyone else?"

He waves his hand through the air. "No. Those are the only families that could possibly overwhelm us if it came down to a war, not just veiled threats in the streets." Dad sighs and I notice just how tired he looks. The skin around his eyes is tight and his face looks gaunt. "Those families are larger than ours, Carter. They have more men. We have more reach, but they could take us in sheer numbers. We need to figure out who the fuck is after us and we need to stop them before it gets too far. I don't want a fucking war." He pauses, his gaze boring into me so deeply, it's like he's seeing into my soul. "I need to know you'll do whatever it takes to ensure we're not the family that's wiped out."

"Of course, Dad. Always."

He stares at me for many long moments. I don't break eye contact just as he taught me. Then he nods, lacing his hands on his desk. "When the time comes, I'll remind you that you said that. And I don't want to hear shit about you saying no."

"Saying no to what?"

Before he can answer—although I'm sure he wouldn't have answered anyway—there's a knock at the door. Dad tells whoever it is to enter. One of the floor managers of the casino Dad has his office in, the Azure Rose Casino, steps inside.

"Sir," he says, looking at dad, then sparing me a curt nod, "Kai St. Clair is here. He's...causing quite a stir."

Dad curses under his breath. "I'll take care of it."

I stand quickly, Gavin following suit. "Allow me."

Sighing, Dad throws his hands up. "Go ahead. Not like I can stop you. But you listen to me, and you listen good. Do not cause a scene in my fucking casino. Squash whatever shit you have going on with Kai. You hear me?"

Not fucking likely. I've spent the better part of my life hating that motherfucker. There's no way that'll stop now.

Dipping my head as if agreeing, I leave Dad's office and follow the floor manager. "Where is he?"

"He's on the main floor," he replies.

"Really?" I ask. That's unlike Kai. He likes to flaunt his money, only hanging out in the high rollers room when he comes to fuck off in our casinos. Dad has someone escort him out every time, but he always comes back. I don't know what the fuck his deal is, but it pisses me off that dad only escorts him out of the casino and doesn't shoot him in the fucking face for his disrespect. If I didn't think their family would retaliate, I'd do it myself.

We take the elevator down to the bottom floor and me and Gavin branch off from the floor manager, after he points to where Kai is. It's not necessary. I could hear the squeals and shouting coming from the craps tables before the elevator doors opened. About half a dozen men dressed in all black suits stand around the table in the middle of the room, facing away from the table as if to protect someone important.

Important my ass. He's an annoying dick and I'm eager to put him in his fucking place.

Pushing through the men that are crowding around him, I grab Kai by his shoulder, spinning him around so he's facing me.

His gray eyes flash with anger and his pale cheeks flush as he stares daggers at me. His long blond hair hangs loose around his face, the thick waves tousled as if he or someone else has been running a hand through it. His plump mouth tips up in a smile when he sees me, though anger still dances in those deep silvery orbs. I'm a few inches taller than him at six three, so he has to look up to meet my gaze. I like that I have that advantage over him, though he has me in weight, probably ten or fifteen pounds heavier than me.

"Carter. Fancy seeing you here," he says conversationally, rolling dice in his hands.

"The fuck are you doing here, St. Clair? You want to bet," I say, snatching the dice from his hand and tossing them on the table behind him, "stay where the fuck you belong."

He smiles—more a baring of teeth than genuine happiness—and crosses his arms over his chest. "Now why would I do that when I can come here and take your money?" He pokes me in my chest, his sharp finger digging into my flesh.

"Don't fucking touch me," I say through gritted teeth. "Get your fucking bitches and get the fuck out." I point to his men and three of them growl at me as if they're going to do something about me calling them bitches. Just because I only have Gavin with me doesn't mean I'm more unguarded than Kai. This is my fucking territory—every man here is my guard.

"What if I want to hang out here?" Kai says with a shrug. "I'm not done gambling yet."

He tries to turn back to the table, where everyone gathered are watching our exchange with wide eyes and bated breath. Even the dealer is waiting for this situation between us to be resolved.

I grip his arm, stopping him from turning back to the table. "Don't fucking dismiss me," I snarl, pushing him by the arm. "I said you need to get the fuck out of here. Now. Before I make you leave."

"Oh yeah?" Kai steps closer to me until we're nose to nose. "Then fucking make me."

Taking a step back, I cock my hand back and connect with his face, hitting him in the mouth.

Kai stumbles back, his hand flying to his split lip. Before he can retaliate, I'm on him, pushing him to the ground and punching him once

more. I pull my arm back to land another hit, but someone grabs my arm before I can bring it down. I look up to see one of his guards, who decks me in the face before I can block the strike. The hit makes me tumble off Kai, dragging my hand to my nose. It's bleeding but not broken.

From there, all hell breaks loose. People push and shove to get out of the way, running back and forth to stay out of range of the fight. Gavin is on the guard that hit me and more of my men come out of the woodwork, taking care of the rest of Kai's men. But he's all mine.

By now, Kai has gotten to his feet, rage dancing in his eyes. "You'll regret that."

"I never regret beating your ass," I growl, stepping up to him so I can rearrange his face.

We both throw a punch at the same time, and we both connect. Kai's hit is brutal, slamming into my mouth with a force I didn't think possible. I stagger back a step, but I shake that shit off. I move back in, and we trade blows, hitting each other wherever we can. I'll have bruises and maybe a black eye, but it's worth it to mark up Kai's pretty face.

I grab the front of Kai's shirt and, with a roar, I toss him onto the table. He grunts as he lands on dice and chips. I hop on the table, putting a knee to his chest as I rain more punches down on him. Kai grips my hand in midair and twists my wrist, causing me to cry out and lose my balance. He rolls with me and immediately locks his hands around my neck, trying to choke the life out of me. Even still, I continue to fight, getting a few hits in to his face before his grip loosens suddenly.

Coughing and trying to suck in greedy pulls of air, I sit up, wondering why he backed off so quickly. When my eyes focus, I see Charles 'Charlie' St. Clair, head of the St. Clair family, holding Kai by the arm. Though Charlie is probably closer to sixty, he's strong and in amazing shape. Kai would be a fool to try him.

Beside him stands my Dad, a look of irritation on his face. I look away, not wanting to draw his ire anymore. I've already embarrassed him enough by showing my ass on the casino room floor.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Charlie asks Kai, shaking him roughly. "I told you to deliver a message, not start a fucking brawl."

"Didn't start it," Kai mutters, then quells under Charlie's gaze. I grin at the display as I wipe my bloodied nose.

"Don't fucking matter who started it. I gave you a fucking order."

Dad looks at me, and I climb off the table. I look around and see the floor is empty, save our families. "Sorry," I say reluctantly.

He huffs. "Not yet, you're not." Dad turns to Charlie. "I told you it was a terrible idea. It'll never work."

"It will because it has to. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to have a word with my son."

"Same. We'll talk soon, yes?"

Charlie dips his head and lets Kai's arm go, pushing him to walk in front of him.

Dad gives me the once over and shakes his head. "Go clean yourself up, Carter. You need to go meet the Colombians. When I need you, you'd better show up. And after this shitshow, I don't want to hear a word from you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He scoffs and marches off, about twenty men in his personal guard following him. Gavin steps up beside me, dabbing at a cut over his eyebrow, but he doesn't look any worse for wear. I bet I look a fucking sight.

Kai might be smaller than me in height, but his extra weight helped him pack a fucking punch. My face throbs and my throat will be sore and raw in the morning, but fuck was that a rush. It's been years since I've thrown hands and even longer since I beat Kai's ass. He deserved every punch he got. I wish I could have landed more. Another few seconds and I would have gotten him off me and been able to fuck his shit up.

Gavin nudges me. "Come on. Let's go before you dad comes back and puts a bullet in my head for not keeping you on task."

I chuckle, wiping under my nose. Blood trickles steadily and I curse, knowing it'll be a while before it stops. "Yeah, right. I need to change into something more presentable. Let's hope I don't get blood on the suit my dad insists I wear. Then we can hit up The Devil's Den. I still have some frustrations to work out." Here's hoping that finding someone to play with in the kink club I just joined helps me blow off some steam.

Gavin laughs beside me. "You got it."

CHAPTER 2



KAI

" gave you one task. One fucking task, Kaison! And you go into that casino and try to cause a bigger rift between me and Dominic than there already is."

Even though I'm a grown man now, I can't stop the pang that shoots through me at my father's reprimand. His approval has always been important to me, but it seems like no matter what I do, I disappoint him.

I know why. It has nothing to do with what I do or don't do and everything to do with the fact that I'm gay. I came out to my dad when I was twelve, hoping he'd say it was okay, that it was a whole new world, and the old rules of the mafia didn't apply. That didn't happen. In fact, he pretended I said nothing and tried to get me to sleep with women to prove it was just a phase. It never worked. And no matter how hard he tried and how many women he fucked, none of them got pregnant and gave him another heir. So, he's stuck with me, and he hates it. He hates *me* for it.

"Yeah, Pop. I know," I say in a bored voice. I try to go for nonchalance, so he doesn't see how his disappointment affects me. Besides, I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't start the fight.

Carter came down fucking with *me*. I was in his casino, yeah, but I wasn't bothering anyone. He could have stayed his dumb ass away from me until I was done gambling. I'd dropped twenty grand in that one game that I wasn't going to get back. He should be thanking me for it.

"You can't know Kai. Because if you did, you wouldn't go there and start shit with Carter. You two have been at each other's throats for decades.

You need to cut the shit."

"No. His family is the enemy. Why should I play nice?"

"Because I fucking said so!" Pop roars. I bristle, but only nod. "If Carter was his younger brother, you would have a fucking bullet in your head, and I'd have to go to war. I don't have the fucking manpower to go to war, Kaison."

Carter's younger brother, Declan, is a fucking loose cannon. He's killed many of our men and my father has had to retaliate over the years. It's been contentious between our families because of him. In comparison, Carter is a saint. He's still a dick, but he listens to his father and tries to keep the peace.

Except when it comes to me.

It seems when we get in close proximity to each other, there are words hurled and fists flying. If it were Declan, he would have shot first and traded insults later.

But Declan could have tried that shit with me if he wanted to. I would have gotten a few good shots in myself before I said hello to the devil.

People have been underestimating me for years since I don't make it a secret that I'm gay. I've had to put men in pine boxes and send a dozen roses to their mothers for testing me.

I cross my arms over my chest, meeting the cold eyes of my father. Thinking back, I can't remember him looking at me with anything other than disdain. I'm not sure why his approval means so much. "So, what do you want me to do now? Fucking apologize?"

He scoffs, shaking his head as he stands from his desk and steps over to the window in his office. "No. Dominic and I will square it away. I need you to go down to The Fox Club and tap Carl. That cocksucker stole money from me and don't think I know. I want you to make an example of that bitch. Teach him not to fuck with the St. Clair family."

The Fox Club is the family lounge, catering to old men that like to drink brandy, smoke cigars, and talk about the glory days. It has a crew of regulars and sometimes some suits like to come in and brag about bullshit after work. It's a good spot that rakes in a lot of dough.

I nod, smiling. He finally gave me an assignment I'm happy to do. He sent me to the casino to tell Dominic that he had the plan in place, though he wouldn't tell me what the fucking plan was. I had every intention of delivering the message, but the craps table was calling me, and I felt lucky.

"No problem," I utter, standing and buttoning my jacket. When I got home, Pop sent me up to my room to clean myself up and put on a new suit. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to fuck off, but I didn't want to hear a lecture about respect. "Anything else? I can take care of Andy too." Andy is the manager of The Fox Club who had to know money was missing, but didn't tell Pop.

"No," Pop says, turning to me with a sinister smile. "Leave him to me."

On my way out of his office, I motion to my guard, Nico, to join me. He strolls over, an easy grin on his face. "Who's ass is on the chopping block today?"

I snicker as we step outside and slide into the back seat of my car. "Carl."

"That prick. I fucking hate that weasel."

Nico has the right of it. Carl was brought in by one of the old timers that works with Pop. I told Pop over and over there was something I didn't like about that clown. Now we have to kill two men—Carl and fucking Andy. Knowing that bozo, he was probably in on Carl having sticky fingers.

I grunt in agreement and push my hair back from my face. I hiss when my hand bumps against my eye. Fuck, Carter got in a good shot. Despite what I think about that prick, he has one hell of a right hook.

Nico studies me with a grin. "You good?"

"Fuck you," I growl, making him laugh. Though Nico was in the thick of the melee, the most he has is a bruise high on his mahogany brown cheek. Besides me—and Carter, I chalk up reluctantly—Nico is a hell of a scrapper.

It's not the first time Carter and I have gotten into it, but it is the first time we've both seemingly lost control. Usually, we'd trade a few blows and that'd be the end of it. This time, Carter seemed out for blood, and I wasn't about to let that bitch get the best of me. If not for Pop pulling me off him, I would have choked him until he passed out.

With a loud laugh, Nico reaches over and pushes my hair over my shoulder and grips my chin. He studies my eye until I slap his hand away. "Put some ice on it when we get back or you'll swell like a balloon."

"Thanks, Nurse Nico," I grumble. He laughs and shakes his head, sliding back to the other side of the seat. "Call ahead at The Fox Club. Tell Manuel to get the basement ready for me. This will take a while."

I never use the basement in The Fox Club without my toys. Knives are my favorites. The sharper, the better. Taking the enemies of my family apart slice by slice is my happy place. I wish Carter could be at the other end of my blade, but Pop won't allow it. But as soon as he does, I'll poke him with so many holes, he'll resemble a fucking sponge.

Once we step into The Fox Club, I nod at Nico for him to find Carl for me. I head down to the basement, removing my jacket and rolling up my sleeves as I trot down the stairs. The table set up for me is over in the corner, and I feel a genuine smile tip up my lips as I make my way over to it.

I look down at the lovely assortment of knives on display. If I'd had one when I was at the casino with Carter, I would have given him a bloody smile, consequences be damned.

I fucking hate that guy. His entire fucking family are fucking assholes, always in competition with ours. But there *is* no competition. We have more money, more territory, more property, more legal businesses. We have more and we're better.

Scuffling has me turning around in time to see Carl's eyes widen as they land on the knives behind me. "No! No!" he shouts, fighting against the hold two of my men have on him. Nico steps around them, standing beside me with his arms crossed.

Ordinarily, I would have my prey chained up so I could have my fun, but I'm still feeling on edge from my fight with Carter and I want to work some of that excess energy off. I turn and pull a fillet knife from the table, twirling it around in my hand.

"Let him go," I tell the men holding Carl. They drop Carl's arms, and he's so stunned, he doesn't move; he simply stands in front of me, shaking. "I heard you had sticky fingers, Carl."

He shakes his head, stepping back as if to put more space between us. One of my guys pushes him forward until he's within arm's reach of me. "No. It wasn't my fault. It was Andy. He made me."

I figured as much, but I didn't think I'd get the answers to what I wanted to know so eagerly. Since he's in a talkative mood, I decide to get some answers. "Why? Are you not making enough money? Is Andy broke? Why not come to us?"

He drops to his knees, raising his hands as if praying. "He said he wanted a house. That no one would know it was me and he would give me a

cut. I never got no cut."

"So, you're gonna die with nothing to show for it." I shake my head in mock disapproval.

"Please, Kai. I'm sorry. I'll pay back every cent. With interest. Just don't kill me."

Annoyed, I kick him in the chest, causing him to fall back with a cry of pain. "Get off your fucking knees. Stand up." After a few more beats, he stands, his hand on his chest as if he's in pain. "You know the consequences of stealing from this family. But today, I'll make you a deal. If you manage to slice me, I'll let you live."

"What?" he asks, looking back and forth between me and the table behind me. "If I slice you?"

"Yeah. Pick your knife. Then we'll get started."

Carl looks at me as if I grew two heads.

Irritated with waiting, I snap my hand out and grab his arm and push him against the table. "Pick a fucking knife or I'll gut you here and now."

With trembling hands, Carl pulls a large butcher's knife from the table, holding it out in front of him. "I don't want to hurt you," Carl says in a trembling voice, making me smile.

"That'll never fucking happen. Give us some room," I tell my guys, who back up.

"Two stacks say Carl will get a slice in," Nico says.

"I'll take that bet," Manuel chimes in.

I snarl at them but keep my eyes on Carl. His wide eyes bounce around, taking me in, probably looking for an opening. Anticipation sings through my veins, my heart thumping, eager for the kill.

Carl roars and runs at me, swinging the blade at me wildly. I step back and dodge the sharp edge. He does get close though—close enough that I feel the wind whipping past my neck.

He curses and advances again, this time, coming at me with stabbing motions. His slashes are easy for me to avoid. I lean away and lash out with my knife, getting a deep gash into his arm. Blood spurts from the wound and Carl curses, dropping the knife he has to press his hand at to the cut. "Fuck! Fuck!"

"Pick the fucking knife back up, Carl. I'm not done with you."

He knows he's in a lose-lose situation. So instead of doing what I say, he tries to run. I allow him to get a few paces away before I pull out my

favorite blade from its holster and throw it at him. My knife finds its target, burying itself in the middle of Carl's back. He cries out and falls forward, his hands scrambling at his back to try to remove the instrument impaling him. It's buried in to the hilt, so he's out of fucking luck.

I bend to get the butcher's knife he had and walk over to him. Grabbing him by his greasy hair, I tune out his begging and pleading and drag it across his throat. The gurgling sounds and his gasps are like music to my ears, soothing the frayed nerves that resulted from my scuffle with Carter.

I drop Carl to the ground and toss the butcher's knife to the floor. Once I'm sure he's dead, I turn back to Nico and the others. "Clean this up. Cut his hands off and leave him where everyone can see. That'll teach him to steal from the St. Clair's." I tilt my head, watching the blood pool around him, mesmerized. "And send a dozen roses to his wife." I pull the knife from Carl's back, wiping the blood on the back of his shirt before sheathing it.

My men snap to, dragging Carl's body away and pulling the hose from the wall to rinse away the blood. I look down at myself, frowning when I see the blood on my shirt. I'll have to leave here through the back entrance, so I don't scare any patrons. Pop would give me shit for that.

I walk back to the table where my knives are and study them. It's been far too long since I've had fun with them. My fingers ghost over the collection, eager to sink them into someone else's flesh. Carl was too easy. I need someone I can really play with.

Sighing, I put the blades back down and turn to see that the room is surface level clean. Our housekeepers will have to come in and bleach everything down, but for now, this will do.

I pull my jacket from the hook it's hanging on and button it up. Looking down, I can't spot any visible bloodstains, so I'm good in case I run into someone. "Let's go, Nico."

His heavy footfalls sound behind me as we ascend the stairs. "You could have let me win that bet," he grumbles as we pass through the back door on the way to my car.

"Shouldn't have bet against me, you fucker." We slide in the backseat of the car and I lean my head back, trying to figure out why that antsy feeling is back. I figured after that fight, I would be on the level. After I dispatched Carl, I felt like I was coming down, but it's almost as if the scuffle with Carl didn't take place. It's like ants are crawling across my skin. I have to fight not to start scratching. I need ...something. A release.

"After my shower," I say to Nico, "get dressed. We're going to The Devil's Den."

I hear the smile in his voice though my eyes are still closed. "Sounds like a good end to the evening."

CHAPTER 3



KAI

fter I get home, I head to Pop's office to let him know I handled Carl and sent a message. He barely glanced my way before shooing me out, telling me I did what was expected of me. The least he could have done was look me in the eye.

The buzzing under my skin compounds with his dismissal. I'm twenty-six; I shouldn't still be seeking the approval of my father. Ever since I was a kid, he's always pushed me to the side when family matters aren't involved. And sometimes when they were. I should be used to his treatment by now.

Taking the stairs to my room two at a time, not for the first time I think about moving out. Pop wouldn't notice if I did. He barely notices when I'm here.

Pushing into my room, I strip off the suit I have on and put my clothing in a bag to be burned in the furnace downstairs. Then I step into the shower, cleaning myself up quickly. It's getting late and I want to get to The Devil's Den quickly.

The Devil's Den is an underground kink club that I've belonged to for some years. It's membership only, so not many people that run in my same circles attend. It's the only place I can get what I need when I'm not having meaningless hookups.

I like being watched. I like when I'm taking a hot little twink hard and men and women see me own his ass. With how I'm feeling, I won't show whoever is under me any mercy. I quickly step out of the shower and dry myself off, getting dressed in a flash. When I step out of my room, Nico falls in step beside me. He can tell I'm on edge, so he doesn't crack any jokes or give me shit. He's been with me long enough to know when I'm not in the mood for games or for him to pop off at the mouth. He also knows the shit I go through with my father and how hard I try to make him proud, even though I've never said the words to anyone aloud.

The drive to The Devil's Den is spent in silence, the streets of New Jersey passing me by in a blur. We blow through the tolls, the EZPass picking up all the charges.

Fucking highway robbery if you ask me.

God, why the fuck am I so on edge? The answer to that is as simple as it is annoying.

Carter.

Fucking Carter. He's been under my skin for years. Every time I see him, anger surges through me. Looking past how handsome and fit he is because that'll just piss me off even more. Nothing about Carter should be attractive to me.

We should have killed his entire family off, not sharing our territory with anyone, but for some reason, Pop wants to keep the peace.

It struck me as odd that they were even conversing in a non-aggressive way when they pulled me and Carter apart at the casino. The last time they were in the same room together, they both had itchy trigger fingers, talking through clenched teeth about a tentative truce to avoid wiping each other out. I thought Pop was playing a long game, planning to take them out anyway, but I should have known Pop was a man of his word. There hasn't been any friction between our families, other than when Carter and I run into each other.

"Nico," I say, breaking the quiet. He hums. "Did you hear when Pop told Dominic that a plan had to work at the casino earlier?" I turn to look at Nico, watching the streetlights play across his dark brown face.

He looks thoughtful, then shakes his head. "No, I didn't catch that. What exactly did he say?" I tell him what I heard, though I might have forgotten a word or two in my embarrassment. Nico shrugs. "Couldn't tell you. Maybe something to do with their truce?"

"They already have one though. There hasn't been any real tension between him and Dominic for years. Think they're fucking?"

Nico's laugh is bright and loud, filling the cab of the car. "Yeah, like that will happen. Your dad's ass is puckered so tight, it's a wonder how he takes a shit."

I laugh with him, shaking my head, both at his terrible joke and trying to dispel images of my father in that position.

A few minutes later, my driver pulls up to the back entrance of The Devil's Den. I slide out, Nico on my heels. He checks our surroundings, gun at his side, then motions for me to step inside. The entrance I'm at now is used for members that want to keep a lower profile. I'm a frequent flyer, so they already know me.

After I give them my and Nico's membership ID numbers and they take our prints, we head inside the club proper.

My nerves start to even out when I take a deep breath, the permanent cinnamon scent strong, but the smell of sex lingering just under it. Fuck yes, this is what I live for.

Men and women walk around scantily clad, or naked, their bodies on display for all to see. I might be gay, but I can recognize a beautiful woman with a nice body and most of those walking around have them. No matter the size and shape of any of the people walking around, they exude sexiness. Their confidence to flaunt their bodies with their heads held high always turns me on.

We make our way over to the bar and order a Coke. I wish it was something stronger, but I can always grab a drink when I get home. Right now, I want to empty my balls into someone. There are condoms all around the room that ensure I come until I'm drained dry.

As I sip my Coke, I see a small, dainty man step from the back hallway. He has on tiny lime green hot pants, his warm brown skin almost glowing under the dimmed lights. Even from so far away, I can see his brown eyes flash with mischief. When his eyes meet mine, his lips curl in a small, self-assured smile.

"Him," I say to Nico.

He follows my gaze and hums in approval. "Good choice."

I crook my finger to the man, beckoning him over to me. He saunters my way, rocking his hips with every step. I spread my legs on the stool I'm sitting on, anticipating him stepping between them so I can touch his flawless skin.

Before he can get to me, a strong hand circles his wrist. Not possessively, but it gets his attention. When my gaze drags up the man that stopped my date for the night, my eyebrows dip in irritation.

Fucking Carter.

Why the fuck is he here? Wait, is he a fucking *member*? There's no fucking way he's a member at my private fucking place. He can't be intruding on every aspect of my life.

My eyes narrow as I watch my prize grin up at Carter. Carter smiles back, letting the pretty twink's wrist go, but stepping closer to him.

"You want to have some fun with me tonight, gorgeous?" Carter asks, his silky words drifting over to me.

I see red when the man chuckles, leaning into Carter. I can't hear what he says but fuck that. I saw him first. He's mine.

Pushing off the stool, I stomp over to Carter and the fine specimen in front of him and grab the twink's wrist. The man looks over at me with a wide smile, his eyes sparkling. I bend down to his ear. "You forgot we were going to play?"

He shakes his head. "I didn't. Give me—"

Carter pushes me on the shoulder, making me stumble back. "Did you not see us talking?"

With a raised eyebrow, I say, "He was coming to see me. You intruded. You can fucking go now."

"I'll go when I want to fucking go," Carter says through clenched teeth, looming over me. Damn those extra inches he has on me. "Now find someone else. He's mine."

A small palm lands on my chest as well as on Carter's. It's almost like we forgot the man between us. His smile is gone, his eyebrows dipped in annoyance. "Look, I don't have time for the macho shit. If you two can get your acts together, you know where to find me. In the meantime, I'll be over there. Where no one is involved in a dick measuring contest." With that, he struts away, his ample ass hanging from the bottom of his shorts.

I turn irate eyes to Carter, but before I can talk shit to him, he has his hand around my throat, and he shoves me towards the wall. My back hits the hard surface at the same time I unsheathe my blade and have it pressed against his thigh. My head knocks back with a thud.

Carter freezes when he feels the edge of my blade, his eyes wide. I grin at him and blow him a kiss. "Oh, you thought you'd have as easy a time as

you did earlier? Nice try, bitch."

He growls in my face, tightening his hand around my throat. I press my blade harder against his leg. My blade is so sharp, I'm sure the fabric of his pants has split. "I will fucking bury you," he snarls, tightening his hand just that fraction more.

I chuckle uncomfortably. I'm not sure if it's because I'm fucking horny as fuck or because I have a soft spot for a man that can toss me around, but my dick gets hard. For fucking Carter.

"If you want to fuck around," I tell him in a tight voice—mostly because he's cutting off my airway—"I can nick this artery before you can choke me out. And I can almost guarantee you there's no doctors around that can save you before I watch you bleed out with a smile on my face."

A hand lands on Carter's shoulder and the guard that's always with him says, "It's not worth it, man. We can continue this some other time." When Carter doesn't step away, his guard says in exasperation, "We'll get fucking banned and tossed out if you don't cut the shit."

Nico steps up beside me, and I can feel the lasers he's shooting at both Carter and his bodyguard. "Listen to your man," I tell Carter. "Unless you want me to take you in one of those rooms and see what you're really about."

"There's no way I'd fuck you," Carter growls, pressing on my neck roughly before he lets me go.

I snicker humorlessly, rubbing at my sore throat. I'm going to fucking bruise. "Who says you'd do the fucking, champ?"

With a snarl, Carter storms off, his shoulders tight and his steps rapid. He throws one icy look over his shoulder and I return it.

Nico laughs. "Wanna find someone else to fuck to get your mind off shit?"

I scoff. "No. My fucking mood is ruined. Carter is fucking everywhere. At least I know he's not at my house."

With more attitude than I came inside with, I stride out of the back door and slide into my car. I slam the door and close my eyes, not wanting to talk to Nico or even look at him.

Where the fuck did Carter come from and why did he have to pick tonight to fucking show up at the club? Out of the four years I've been a member at The Devil's Den, I've never seen Carter there. Did he just get approved as a member? How did he hear about it? Is Carter gay? Bi? Pan?

What is his kink? What makes Carter tick?

No. No, fuck that thought. I don't want to know anything about what Carter does or doesn't do. Though it seems we have the same taste in men.

God, that man was fucking gorgeous. And the way his hips moved when he was walking towards me? I know he would have ridden me into fucking oblivion.

Fucking Carter had to interrupt and get in my way. I swear to fucking God I will end him the next time I see him.

Once at home, I tell Nico I'm turning in the for the night and jog up to my room. Looks like it'll be a lonely night with me and my hand, but that's cool. I have the object of my fantasies. Next time I go to The Devil's Den, I'll have that man, and I'll have him hard and deep. Until then, I'll let my imagination run wild.

I strip off my clothes and climb between my sheets. Reaching into my night stand, I pull out a bottle of lube. I drizzle some on my cock and close my eyes, stroking myself slowly as I think about being in one of those rooms, the man with the tiny lime green shorts bent over and impaling himself on my cock. I can almost feel the eyes of those watching on me like a physical thing, watching as I fuck the man into the mattress.

My strokes pick up as I imagine how his plump ass would look bouncing against me, the perfect jiggle.

Then my fantasy warps and I'm helpless to stop it. When I look up to take a glance at those watching me, I only see Carter watching us. His aquamarine eyes burning into us as he palms his cock. I want to stop touching myself, but the feel of Carter's gaze on me, even in a fantasy, cranks my arousal up to astronomical levels. My hand moves up and down on my dick frantically, chasing my release.

"Fuck," I groan, jacking one of my legs up to my chest as my cock shoots off. Cum paints my chest in waves as I imagine the dark, lustful look in Carter's gaze. I keep coming and coming, my balls drawing up to my body as they empty themselves.

After an untold amount of time, I forcefully pull my hand away from my dick. Son of a bitch. Of all people to make me come like a fucking geyser, it's Carter?

I toss my blanket from around my legs and storm into the bathroom to clean myself up. I'm more angry than relieved at my release, even though it's the best orgasm I've had in ages. There should be no reason thoughts of Carter made me do anything but scowl in disgust. But I had an orgasm while I stared into the eyes of fantasy Carter.

I need to get back to the club and fuck someone soon. There can't be another repeat of what just happened.

CHAPTER 4



CARTER

eeing Kai last night at The Devil's Den was a shock, but I didn't let on. I knew he was gay—everyone knows that—but I didn't think he was involved in any kind of kink.

Will he tell anyone he saw me there? I'm bi, men and women do it for me, but no one but Declan and Gavin know that. It's no one's business. I thought going somewhere no one knows me to fuck a twink into the mattress would improve my mood. But seeing Kai, knowing he wanted what I wanted, and I couldn't have it almost sent me into a spiral. It's one thing to attack him at the casino, but something totally different to try to fuck him up in public where the cops could be called. The guns I have on me at all times have a few bodies on them. I'd be locked up for life if I were arrested for fighting Kai. It would have felt good to pummel him, but at what cost?

And what the fuck did he mean he could take me into a room to see what I'm about? I know what it means, but what the fuck? I wouldn't touch Kai with a ten-foot pole and I know he feels the same. He's such a fucking asshole.

I push into the front door of my father's house, irritation resting firmly on my shoulders. My balls are too full, too heavy since I didn't get a chance to come last night. After running into Kai at The Devil's Den, I don't want to go back. And I have no hookups on the horizon.

I take the stairs to the second floor two at a time so I can talk to my dad. He'll be pleased to see I have on a suit today. I don't look like myself, but for the meeting today, I'll need to follow the rules.

Dad's guards see me coming and clap hands with me before they open his office door. Declan is standing in front of Dad's desk, his arms crossed over his chest and a look of annoyance clear on his face.

"Baby brother," I say, throwing my arm over his shoulder and bringing him in for a hug.

As he usually does, he pushes me away, shooting me a dry look. "I'm twenty-four, Carter. Hardly a baby."

"You'll always be my baby brother." I bump his shoulder, and he rolls his eyes, though a small smile crops up on his face.

After our mother was killed, Declan has been standoffish and almost detached about everything. He loves the family and does whatever needs doing, but he always feels just out of reach. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss how he used to be when we were kids. One day, maybe we'll get back to that.

Dad sets his phone down and looks at me with raised eyebrows. "Nice threads," he comments.

I look down at the sleeves of my black tailored suit with the crisp black shirt under it. Declan is dressed similarly, the contrast of his light hair and the dark suit sharp. "I figured you'd like it. I came by to ask if you wanted to stand in with me while I talk to the Dominicans. Juan Reyes says we can meet him outside of Yorkley. He has a warehouse that's about five miles over from our territory line. Close enough that if something pops off, we won't be vulnerable."

Most of our casinos and legal businesses are in Yorkley where we make the most money from tourist spending money like its water and locals that like to flaunt money they don't really have.

Dad sits back in his chair, tapping two fingers across his lips as he thinks. Finally, he says, "Yeah, I'll tag along but I'll let you take the reins. I can feel it in my bones that my time as the head of this family is coming to an end. You need to start stepping up more."

I nod, though I don't like the sound of what he's saying. Dad and I may bump heads sometimes, but I love him. Unlike most in this business, he's been as doting as he could be. Even more so since we lost Mom. This is a brutal business, so Dad has been getting me and Declan ready for it, but he's never been dismissive of us. All things considered—since he's still stuck in his ways when it comes to me not wearing a suit all the time and

my tattoos—he's been a good father. Hopefully, he just means retirement and not that he feels his death is coming soon. I'd lose my shit if I lost him.

"Have you heard from the Petrov's or the Fensters'?"

"Not yet," I say, shaking my head. "They're not as easy to get to like the Reyes's."

Dad stands and rounds his desk, a grim look on his face. "Things are heating up. Two of our warehouses were hit last night. One was empty, the other had some gun shipments. They were stolen and our men were killed. Both were set on fire. Insurance will pay for the buildings, but there will be questions. The chief of police called and said he'll come out himself so he can fudge the reports. But we need to find out who it is before they cause more damage and steal more of our product."

The chief of police is an old friend of Dad's and has been in his pocket since he was on the beat. They go way back, so none of the shit we do blows back on us, though there was a close call when I was younger when my mom was killed.

My hackles rise as I listen to Dad. Who the fuck is trying to bring my family down and why? Other than the St. Clair family, we have the most territory and have our hands in the most pots down in Yorkley and the surrounding South Jersey. Dad said they're not involved, and I know it's not the Colombians. The Dominicans need to set us at ease during this meeting, so we won't have three families to contend with.

Though I don't think it's the Dominicans either. We're not friendly with them, but we're not openly hostile either. We don't bother them, and they don't bother us. They have a good chunk of territory in the neighboring area, and they usually keep to themselves. I'm hoping their willingness to accept a meeting means they're not involved.

I don't care about starting a war. I live for shit like that, but even if we win, we'll lose. We're just starting to rebuild our ranks. There could be nothing left by the time it's all said and done.

Declan curses, his eyes flashing with anger. "I swear to fucking god I will gut the motherfuckers that are fucking with us. What do we know?"

"Nothing," Dad says in an almost strained tone. "Whoever it is, they're smart. They're keeping a tight lid on their plans. Something needs to be done."

I nod in agreement. "After this meeting, we can discuss the next steps. I have a few ideas."

Dad looks at me long and hard, his expression unreadable. "Let's go."

I exchange glances with Declan but follow Dad down the stairs and out the door. We all climb into my SUV, and I point us in the direction of Normont, where the Dominicans take up residence.

Declan pulls his gun from his holster, checking the chamber, then flipping the safety off. "How much business have you done with the Reyes family?" he asks as he checks for clips in his pockets.

"None. I reached out in good faith, hoping he wouldn't want his people to be caught up in some bullshit."

Declan scoffs. "Yeah, and tell him we're vulnerable? Smart move, Car."

"If they wanted to attack, you think they'd wait until the day of the meeting to do it? That would put a target on their backs," I say matter-of-factly.

He grunts but doesn't say anything further.

I don't want to admit it, but I did take a risk by telling the Reyes family what I wanted to talk to them about. Juan might be in the life, but as my family does, they believe in honor amongst thieves. From the little I know about them, the Reyes family don't push first. They're content to get money and retaliate when necessary.

Five or so years ago, the Albanians tried to run the Reyes family out of town, starting a war that almost spilled over into the entire state of New Jersey. But the Reyes family were well equipped and had people everywhere. They pushed the Albanians out to the point that they no longer have a foothold in the state. They didn't start the war, but they finished it in a big way.

I glance in the rearview mirror to make sure my guys are following behind us. Juan asked not to have more than my dad and brother with me when we came to the meeting, just as he will only have two of his men. So as not to cause bad faith, I plan to honor that. But they won't be far behind.

Thirty minutes after we leave Dad's place, we pull up to the designated warehouse. Just like mine, Declan's head is on a swivel, looking around to make sure this isn't a set up. From what I can see, there are no shooters on the roof or around any corners. The only car I see is a sleek black BMW.

After making sure the coast is clear, I motion for Dad to step out of the car and we approach the door. I knock on it three times in rapid succession, pause, then knock five times more slowly. The door pops open and Juan Reyes himself stands on the other side.

"Carter Whitlock. It's a pleasure." His light words hold sincerity. "Do come in."

I step to the side and allow Dad to step in first, then follow behind, Declan bringing up the rear.

When we're all inside, I turn to Juan and hold out my hand. A historic first since our families have never had any meeting or truce.

Juan pauses for a moment, looking at my hand. When I think he won't shake, he clasps my hand, shaking it once. "Thanks for taking this meeting."

"Please," he says, indicating we step further into the room. Two other men stand near a flight of stairs. Both are spitting images of Juan, so I take it they're either his brothers or his sons. "This is Junior, my son," he says, pointing to a man with a long black ponytail and permascowl, "and this is my brother, Alonso. You did not bring anyone else with you, correct?"

"No. Just my father and brother. Declan and Dominic." I point to my brother and father in turn. "As you asked."

Juan dips his head. "Thank you for that. Now, tell me about what is going on in your camp."

Declan speaks up. "And what's to say you won't use it against my family? How do we know it's not you that's fucking with us?"

With a raised eyebrow, Juan gives Declan the once over. I step in front of him, drawing his attention away from my brother. Yeah, we're meeting with them on what I hope to be good terms, but I won't hesitate to lay him the fuck out if he tries something with Declan.

Juan only smirks. "If it were me, you would be dead as soon as you crossed that boundary, little boy."

"I got your little boy, bitch," Declan says, his hand going into the jacket of his suit.

Junior and Alonso's hand go in the same direction, though no one pulls their weapons. Dad steps up as if to speak, but I beat him to it. If he wants me to take over the family, I have to diffuse this shit. Though Declan will have to answer for putting us at risk on enemy territory. Sometimes, his fearlessness is a fucking deterrent.

"Enough, D. Remove your hand from your gun. Now." A few tense moments pass before he does what I say. Alonso and Junior follow suit. "Though, he has a point, Juan. What's to say you're not behind the rumblings of a war starting?"

Juan waves me forward and we slowly start walking deeper into the warehouse. "We were almost wiped out by the Albanians all those years ago. We won and we took their territory, but at what cost? Junior and Alonso are all the immediate family I have left. Everyone else is dead or in prison. We have a strong grip on our territory, but another war will annihilate us. We can't take another hit." He stops walking when we get into the warehouse proper. The room is empty and roomy, a slight chill in the air. "We don't have the manpower to take you on."

I wonder why he brought me through this area, then it clicks: it's a sign of trust. He's showing me that he has no one else here either, that he expected me to follow his instructions and he's showing me that he's a man of his word. He only has his brother and his son with him.

I nod, giving him the indication that I appreciate him showing that he's kept his end of the bargain. "I hear you. Are you planning to join forces with whomever is against my family?"

Juan shakes his head. "That would be foolish. I'd have to tell them how much manpower I don't have. What's to say I join up, they eliminate you and they come after me? No, I'm already risking a lot by telling you of our troubles. And I only tell you so you know it is not us that want to take your territory."

"And you've heard nothing?" Declan asks, his voice still holding that hard edge.

"Nothing," Alonso says, the same edge in his tone. "We don't want any part of an impending war. We will tend to our business and remain neutral. We are ready if it happens, but not before. We have all we need. We are not greedy. And honestly, we will not survive another war."

He sounds sincere. I glance at Dad, and he nods once. Turning back to Juan, I ask, "Do we have your word that you won't take sides?"

Juan places his hand on his chest, right above his heart. "On my honor as a Reyes, I will not take up arms against your family, nor will I join yours. In this, we are neutral."

We shake hands again—Juan taking my hand quicker this time—and we head out.

When we get back to Dad's house and step inside, I grab Declan by the arm and push him against the wall, putting my hand around his throat. I pull him from the wall and slam his head back again, making him hiss.

He glares at me, but I don't give a fuck. My anger at him was barely contained the entire time we were talking, and it was only my upbringing from Dad not to embarrass the family in public that I waited so long to check him.

Getting in his space and putting enough pressure on his throat that his eyes bulge, I say, "Next time you feel like being a fucking cowboy, leave me and Dad out of it. You could have fucking got us killed because you can't control your fucking temper."

Declan tries to speak, but I have too tight a grip on his throat. After a few more seconds, I let him go. He coughs and drags in a deep breath. "The fuck? All I did—"

"Was speak out of fucking turn," Dad says, his face a mask of rage as he looks at his youngest son. "Carter is right. You almost got us killed. No one asked you to fucking speak. You don't think before you do. You might be able to get the drop on someone, but you weren't the only one involved in the fucking meeting. I raised you to use your fucking brain, D, but I might as well have saved my fucking breath if you're gonna do dumb shit."

Declan looks down with an irritable look on his face. But he knows we're right. He's a hothead, tending to shoot first and ask questions later. With us so close to a war, we can't afford that. We can't afford any mistakes or everything we've built will be destroyed.

"I got it," he grumbles, then pushes past me out the door.

I stare after him, shaking my head. I'll call him tomorrow and we can talk about it, but right now, we both need to cool down. If I see him again for the rest of the day, I might knock him the fuck out.

Dad gets my attention. "Come. Let's talk in my office."

When we're in his office, I walk over to the bar and pour us both a glass of whiskey. I shoot my first one, then pour a second glass to nurse while we talk.

I hand Dad his glass and he takes a sip, grimacing as the swallows the burning liquid down.

We sip our drinks in silence for a moment, then Dad sighs. "We're almost in the same boat as Juan Reyes. We have more men than him, but not enough to ensure that whichever family might be opposing us will be beat back mercilessly. If we win, it'll be barely." Dad pauses and meets my eyes. For some reason, my heart rate quickens, and my palms get sweaty.

I drink the rest of the whiskey from my glass and place it on the edge of his desk. "What do we do?"

"The only thing we can do. We form an alliance. I've brokered a marriage with a family that, coupled with ours, will swell our ranks and we will easily win a war if it comes to that. But we have to move quickly."

My stomach in knots, I ask, "What family did you form an alliance with? I take it I'll be the one that will be marrying her? I'll do it. Anything to ensure this family and our territory survives."

Dad sighs again, leaning back in his chair. He looks ten years older, his cheeks sunken and his eyes dull. I've never known him to look so aged, so weathered. He's always been a force to me, someone strong and sure. But now, he looks as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders, and he can hardly handle it.

"I formed an alliance with the St. Clair family."

It takes me a moment to realize what he said. The St. Clair family. The fucking St. Clair family?

Then it hits me like a ton of bricks. Kai is an only child.

CHAPTER 5



KAI

"

fucking won't," I tell Pop, pacing his office. "You fucking negotiated a fucking marriage for me? What the fuck?"

Pop watches me pace, his face blank and uncaring. "You will do your fucking duty to this family. Be useful. For once, your...perversion can be more beneficial to this family than a detriment."

"Be useful?" I shout, rounding on him. "I'm *always* fucking useful! Anything you ask me to do, I fucking do it. This family runs because of me."

"No!" Pop bellows standing and slamming both hands on his desk. "This family runs because of *me* and all that *I've* done. You just take fucking orders. Like you will now. You will marry Carter, and you won't say another fucking word about it."

My anger won't be contained, despite what Pop says or how he threatens me. "Why? Because of those threats you've been getting? We can take care of our family and eliminate whoever is after us. We don't need them."

Over the past few weeks, someone has been trying hard to put a dent in how our family runs. They've intercepted the alcohol deliveries for our club, stolen a shipment of drugs and almost got away with some of the pills we move. They didn't succeed because the driver that had that shipment was able to get away by blowing through a red light.

Pop likes to pretend he's not worried around me, but I've heard him discussing with his guard that we have to find some way to stop the mystery

people before we end up in a war we can't possibly win.

"Yeah?" Pop rounds his desk and gets in my face. "You think someone that is on a smaller scale than this family will take on two families at once? We don't have the fucking manpower to repel anyone. We need the Whitlocks like they need us. If not, we'll be killed and the family that *does* the killing will take over fucking South Jersey." I cross my arms over my chest, irritation radiating off me. "It's fucking done. You'll be married in two weeks, and you'll move in with him."

When he dropped the news that I would be entering an alliance with Carter fucking Whitlock via marriage, I figured I'd have to move out of this place. But I didn't think Pop would sound so fucking gleeful about it. I can almost hear the note of elation that I would no longer be residing under his roof. It hurts more than I'd like to admit.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

He scoffs, pushing past me to exit his office. "This isn't about you, Kaison. It's about protecting this family and its name. You'll do your duty to this family and form this truce. Besides, other than being the heir to the Whitlock family, Carter is an accountant. He can be an asset to our business and since he'll be family, he'll have our best interest. Especially at that construction company you insist on holding. It needs an overhaul from what I hear. Stop being stubborn and sign it over so I can make it better. More fucking profitable if you're going to waste your time on it."

My construction company is very profitable, and Pop damn well knows it. We just landed a contract on a strip mall at the edge of Yorkley, the next town over. Not only does it do well legitimately, but I'm able to launder money through the company and we get it back clean.

No matter what I try to do to better this family, Pop will shit all over it. He tries to minimize everything I do, just so he can make it seem like he carries this family on his back. If not for me, we wouldn't have half the businesses we do or the connections we have. Pop is good at what he does —running this family—but he lacks severely in diplomacy. I've undercut several families to get our connections, and none have been the wiser. If Pop were doing the negotiating, we'd be the weakest family in the area.

"I'm keeping my business," I practically growl. This is a fight Pop and I have often. He's probably hoping to wear me down with his persistence. "My accountants are fine. I don't need him."

"You might not, but you'll use him anyway. You'll strengthen this family. Make that Whitlock boy fall for you, adopt a kid or whatever your kind do and tie him to you forever." I hiss at his words but swallow the sound.

This is fucking bullshit, but there's nothing I can do or say to get him to change his mind. "What if I say no?"

Pop turns around, a stormy look on his face. "There is no fucking saying no, Kai. I gave my word. You will not fucking embarrass me."

He put me in a terrible position. If I duck out on his arrangement, his reputation and that of our family will be damaged. No one will want to do business with him, thinking he won't hold up his end of the bargain. So, I'm forced to do his bidding. If I'm to take over the family, I need our reputation intact, not be the reason it's in tatters.

I'm not sure why Pop thinks I'll be able to run both the St. Clair and the Whitlock families on my own. Just as Carter wouldn't be able to run the St. Clair family. I'll be an outsider. It'll take years, decades even, for that family to trust me. I'm not sure what delusions he has, but he should abandon that shit now.

Shaking my head, I say, "I'll do it, but only until this threat is neutralized. After that, we're divorcing, and I'm done with that family."

Pop stares at me, his face reddening because I dare negotiate with him. But it's my life. It's for the family, but my life matters too. I won't be stuck in a marriage with my enemy for hypothetical wars. The one on the horizon is the only one I have to worry about. After that, my life will be my own.

Through clenched teeth, Pop says, "Five years. Five. By that time, I'll be retired, and you can do what the fuck you want. But if there is a war because of your stupid fucking need for independence, you'll be on your own. I'll snatch the reins from you, so you don't ruin everything I've built."

I incline my head. That's as good as I'll get. I've worked too hard not to run this family when he retires. I'll do what I have to do to get my birthright. "Fine."

"Now let's go. We need to meet with the Whitlocks to discuss this wedding. It has to be big, and it has to be public. It might give whoever is fucking with our shit some pause and make them think twice about crossing us."

I grunt and follow him out of the house.

We arrive at the Azure Rose Casino forty-five minutes later. I grin when I look over at the craps table. That was a good scrap. There'll be no more of that since we're probably supposed to be a happy couple or some shit.

The elevator whisks us to the top floor, the glass doors gliding open when it stops. Carter's guard pushes off the wall when he sees us, his face set in a mask of indifference. I bristle at his lack of acknowledgment. "Good afternoon," I mutter, sending him a sharp smile.

He grunts and says, "Follow me. They're waiting in the conference room." He walks away without seeing if we follow. I look at Pop and I'm not surprised to see a flash of anger cross his face. We're the same in that regard—any dismissals are taken as personal slights.

Pop grabs the man's arm and before he can turn around with some bullshit, places a gun to his temple. Pop steps closer, and they stand nose to nose. "Make that the last fucking time you show me your back in such a disrespectful way. If not, I will put you down and pay for your shitty pine box. Understand me?"

To his credit, the guard doesn't even flinch. He stares my father down with an almost bored expression. Like a gun to his head means nothing. "You feel better? Feel like you've marked your territory?"

Pop snarls and clicks the safety off. "Not yet. Your blood on the wall might give me a twinge of satisfaction."

The guard smiles—more of a grimace—and says, "Do what you gotta do. But you'll still be needed in the conference room."

"That's enough, Gavin," comes from down the hall. Carter steps closer to us and crosses his arms over his chest. "We gonna do this or what?"

Pop and the guard—Gavin—stare each other down, neither willing to back off. I watch, hoping Pop will splatter his blood across the wall. It's been a while since I've seen him work.

But I'm sure the implications of the truce being voided if he does looms large, because he clicks the safety back on his gun and puts it in the holster. "Yeah, we're gonna do this. But he comes nowhere near our discussion." Pop points to Gavin with disdain.

"Go, Gavin. We'll talk later," Carter says in a hard voice.

Gavin drags his eyes from Pop and meets Carter's. "You got it, boss." He saunters down the hall, head held high.

"This way," Carter says, glaring at me before he looks at Pop. "Dad is waiting."

We follow behind him to the end of the hall. The room we step into has a large table that can seat at least twenty people. The large windows overlook the entirety of Yorkley, the lights of the evening not yet illuminated, but I'd wager the view is nice when it is. Annoyance and a twinge of jealousy nags at me because the Whitlocks have the tallest building on the strip. It's the one business they got over us and me and Pop are still sore about it.

A bar lines the opposite wall, all manner of top shelf liquor stocked up. If I trusted the Whitlocks, I would pour a glass of Jack just to get through this farce, but I don't, so I'll have to wait until I get home to drink this nightmare away.

Dominic stands and shakes Pop's hand. Neither of them looks happy about it, but they're not openly hostile. Not like Carter and I are. He glares at me just as I glare at him. I can't believe our dads think this is a good idea. It's no secret that we fucking loathe each other.

Maybe that's the point. Every other family will know that we're together not because we love each other and want to live happily ever after, but because we put aside our differences to make our families stronger. It'll send a clear message that we're willing to do anything to survive, even if it means working with our enemies.

Pop and I sit at the other end of the table. Nothing is said for many untold minutes, everyone getting the measure of each other.

Dominic's guards glare at ours, distrust mirrored on everyone's face. If someone makes a wrong move, it'll be a blood bath in this room.

Finally, Dominic says, "You all can go. We need to speak privately." The men we brought with us regard Pop as the Whitlock men regard Dominic. Then they take their leave. When we're alone, Dominic says, "This isn't the most ideal situation, but we need each other."

"We could always have a truce without marriage," I mutter.

"For once, I agree with the bitch across from me," Carter says.

"Fucking enough," Dominic declares with a hard edge to his tone. "A marriage tells the world that we are stronger together and we will fight for each other. What are promises? Words that can be easily broken. But with you two married, you become family. When you fuck with family, you die. What is it that's so hard to understand about that?"

"I got it, Dad," Carter says, though he doesn't sound happy about it.

"How will we merge our businesses?" Pop asks. I should have known he'd want to know that above anything else. "I have businesses in my name and Kai has some in his."

"Same with me and Carter."

Pop pauses and seems like he's chewing over his words. Then begrudgingly, he says, "We keep our shit separate for anything they came into the marriage with. They can buy and accumulate other shit together and it can be in both St. Clair and Whitlock names. Any kids they have will inherit everything."

Kids? I balk at that thought. Not at having kids, I've always wanted kids. Two. But having them with Carter? It's never been a thought in my mind. Judging by how quick tempered he is, he'd probably be a horrible father. I already have a shit dad; I won't subject my future children to that.

Carter looks about as unimpressed with the idea as I do. His lips are turned down at the corners, his eyes brimming with irritation. Then I meet his eyes and know nothing will be accomplished if left up to us. If I could get away with it, I'd toss him out this window and smile when he paints the sidewalk below with his blood. Kids wouldn't be relevant then.

"Carter is an accountant," Dominic says, thumbing to his son. Pop already told me that. I'm wondering why he's so fucking proud of that fact. I went to college too. "He can go over your books and make sure everything looks good."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell them both to fuck off, that my guys can handle it all, but Pop talks over me. "And you have that new restaurant that's been halted because of that construction company that went under. Kai has a company that can get started immediately after the wedding."

"Speaking of the wedding," Dominic says, leaning forward and threading his fingers together, "two weeks is too long to wait. We don't know when someone will try something new and ramp up these skirmishes to an all-out confrontation. Two of our warehouses were hit, halting shipments to two different organizations out of state. It's fucking with our money. The sooner you two," he points between me and Carter, "are wed, the sooner whoever is fucking with us will back off."

"How soon are you thinking?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"Next week," Carter says through clenched teeth, not looking happy about this bullshit either.

"That's too soon," I tell them, not caring how petulant it makes me sound. "It's not enough time to—"

"It's plenty of time," Pop cuts me off and I narrow my eyes at the side of his head. "Seven days, and we'll have a wedding large enough that every family from here to New York will know about it." Pop looks at me in challenge. After a few beats, I look away, fire dancing in my veins.

First, he plans for us to get married, then puts a time limit on how long I have to stick it out. Now we go from two weeks for me to wrap my mind around a fucking marriage to Carter to one fucking week.

Carter looks at me and raises an eyebrow. I ignore it and throw my hands up. "Whatever. Just tell me where to be and what to wear. I need some air. Pop, I'll be at the car."

I can feel his glare on my back, but I don't give a fuck. He's called all the shots. This is his wedding; I'm just the hapless groom standing in. Carter and I are just pawns in the games of the heads of our families. If we were the bosses, this fucking sham marriage wouldn't have even been considered.

One of Pop's guards follows me since he ordered Nico to stay behind.

Maybe this marriage won't be a total wash. I'll be able to do what the fuck I want to do without being under Pop's thumb. With all I do for our family, you'd think he wouldn't give me as much shit as he does and let me make my own decisions.

Knowing I won't be under his roof and under his control fills me with mixed emotions. I'm so used to his bullshit, it's almost second nature. Now I'll be free.

But am I just exchanging one prison for another?

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CHAPTER 6



CARTER

don't want to have this meeting today, but it's best for my family to integrate more with the St. Clair's inner circle now than right before the wedding in three days.

Three fucking days, I'll be a married man. I can't say it doesn't piss me off. Despite how brutal this business is, Mom and Dad's marriage was the real deal. Dad loved Mom and she loved him right back. He gave her everything she wanted and needed. The only thing he wasn't able to do is save her from the bullets that were meant for him. The bullets she took for him.

I've wanted a marriage like that. Sure, it would have been hard, not many women understand the game and how dangerous it is. But I figured I'd have all the time in the world to find that special someone that would be Mrs. Whitlock.

Now, I'm marrying my enemy. It doesn't matter than he's a man; it's the fact that it's fucking *Kai*. Of all people, I have to tie myself to him.

I'm not naive enough to think it will only be for a matter of years like Kai is. This is for life. Our lives will be forever intertwined, and I fucking *despise* him for it. My dad and Charlie St. Clair are also on my shit list.

It's hard to be pissed at my dad, but he knows how important it is to make my own decisions. He said he would never use me or Declan as a pawn in his games, but that's what he's doing. Maybe he doesn't see it as a game because if we don't align ourselves with the St. Clair's, we'll end up

dead. It's a matter of survival. But fuck if I don't feel a little miffed that I have no say in who takes my last name.

Will he take my last name? Knowing Kai, he'll fight me on that, even if he doesn't care.

"Fucking asshole," I grumble under my breath, but Gavin hears me.

He glances over at me with a raised eyebrow. "What's up?"

"Nothing," I say, not wanting him to know that I'm bitching about Kai taking my last name, even though I don't want to be married to him at all. "Listen, don't start bullshit today. It took Dad hours to convince Charlie not to kill you for your disrespect. I'd hate to kill that family off before this truce even got started."

Gavin grins at me, but I can see he's at least a little apologetic. One thing I can say about Gavin is he's loyal and his loyalty doesn't have a price tag. He'd never fuck me and my family over, no matter how bad his ego wants to rebel.

"You got it. I'll be cool."

I take his word for it because he's not the type to lie.

Instead of meeting at our casino like we did last time, Dad agreed that it's best to meet at theirs, to make the arrangement seem equal. I honestly don't give a fuck where we meet. This marriage is happening, whether I like it or not, so where we meet to talk is the least of my concern.

My biggest worry? Kai coming to live with me. After Kai stormed off the other day, Charlie said that part of the deal is nonnegotiable. I broached us not living in the same place, under the guise of not being together if someone tries to kill one or both of us, but my Dad and Charlie saw right through that shit.

"You're stronger together," Charlie said, and Dad agreed.

I wouldn't live with Charlie and Kai, so I guess it was settled. Why does Kai still live with his father? We're the same age, but he has a room at his father's place. Yeah, it's big as fuck, but why not have his own home? I moved out of Dad's house when I was nineteen, happy not to be under his watchful gaze all the time.

The Indigo Arc Casino is the first casino the St. Clair family built when they started buying up real estate, from what my father told me. It's small, showing their lack of knowledge of casinos and their builds. Though I'm not sure how. Kai owns a construction company—why the fuck he hasn't given this casino a facelift is beyond me. So he won't embarrass me in this

marriage, I'll make him shut this place down for at least half a year so I can make it better.

There are no patrons today, the casino closed down for this meeting. With two rival mafia families gathered in one place, it's smart not to have innocent civilians around. If this meeting goes awry, having an empty casino would benefit everyone.

When we step inside, a guard from my family and one from the St. Clair's stand beside the door. I clap hands with Richard, one of our guys and give the St. Clair's man the once over, dismissing him with a twist of my lip.

"Gotta search you," Richard says. "No gun policy." He looks pointedly at Gavin.

I take my piece from under my arm and from around my ankle and hand them to him. I keep my blade on me. They said no guns, not no weapons. I learned that little tidbit from Kai, when he pulled a knife on me at The Devil's Den. It's a handy weapon to have at the ready.

Once we've handed over our guns, the St. Clair man tells us where to go to get to the gathering. Gavin walks ahead of me, checking in the spaces of the doors to make sure no one pops out. Despite how much he jokes around, he doesn't fuck around when it comes to my safety.

We make it to the gathering and there are wall to wall dangerous motherfuckers. On one side are my people, standing behind my dad and on the other side are the St. Clair's, posted up behind Charlie. While Charlie and Dad have been working together on this bullshit arranged marriage for months, they still don't trust each other. It's evident in their eyes and their posture.

Kai is leaning against a window across from the door I just entered, directly in the middle of both families, his arms crossed over his chest. His expression appears bored, but I can tell he's on high alert. When his gaze locks on mine, his eyebrows dip further and his lip curls.

Fuck him.

I don't take a page from his book—I go to stand by my father, facing the enemy. Facing the family I have to tie myself to for survival.

Charlie grunts, his gaze straying over to Kai, then back over to us. "Let's get down to business. Our families have been at odds for decades. Now it's time to let bygones be bygones, for the sake of our families' longevity."

"I agree," Dad says, clasping his hands together in front of himself. "My son, Carter, has agreed to the prospect of marriage with your son. With the union of our families, we will be one. That means we have to work together, put aside our difference and figure out how to move forward as the St. Clair-Whitlock family."

Well, I guess that answers my question about last names.

"Is everyone in agreement?" Charlie asks.

One of the St. Clair men steps up beside Charlie, his large mustache making it hard to understand what he's saying. "I don't like this any more than anyone else standing here. But I don't want to die, my name forgotten when I put my blood, sweat and tears into building this family into the force that it is now. If working with the Whitlock family ensures I keep getting money and my family will be taken care of, I am with you. But if at any moment, you fuck us over—"

Dad cuts the man off with a snarl. "You have no room to threaten me, Henry. You'd do well to remember that you're not the boss of this family. Step back before I make you."

Charlie raises his hand before Henry can reply. "That's enough. There will be no betrayals. We all have shared interests in this endeavor. So, let's figure out how we can make it work."

During the entire discussion, Kai and I don't say a word. Which does more to show that we aren't really important in the grand scheme of things. We're here to do our duty and make sure our families thrive. Other than that, we have no say.

That alone makes me want to rebel against this whole marriage. The only thing that stops me is the news we received before we attended this meeting.

One of our shipments was almost intercepted, just as the St. Clair's told us theirs was. Someone chased down our decoy truck and killed the driver. Luckily for us, none of our product was on board. A message was spray painted on the back of the truck: *We're coming for you*.

It's the first time they've made contact with us. From what Charlie said, they've been sending him messages for a while. So, despite how much I don't want to go through with this marriage, I have no choice if I want us to survive.

After details are hashed out and we figure out how to seamlessly—as much as possible anyway—integrate as one big happy fucking family,

everyone starts to leave. Dad holds me back, and Charlie walks over to Kai. I guess they want to talk to the two of us. Or berate, going by how red Charlie's face is while he talks to Kai. He may try to look unaffected, but I can see an emotion dancing in Kai's eyes while he looks at Charlie, though I can't identify it.

It's obvious they don't have a relationship like me and Dad. I'm not even sure Charlie likes Kai, if the rumors told about them are true. It's said that Charlie almost beat Kai to death when he told him he was gay. Then tried to get him to fuck every woman that he brought in front of him, even while he was underage. That's a big reason why I wonder why Kai still lives under his roof. It's obvious Charlie doesn't care if Kai lives or dies and is only interested in conversing with him now because he's useful to him.

An unfamiliar twinge flows through me, but I push it away. I can't be feeling sorry for Kai. Fuck him. If his father doesn't like him because he's gay, that ain't on me. I haven't told Dad I'm into dudes as well as chicks, but if I did, he wouldn't give a fuck. His love comes without conditions, which is more than I can say for most people.

Kai pushes off the wall and saunters over to us, his face a blank mask though his cheeks are tinged a dark red. "Carter," he says in a voice devoid of any emotion.

"Kaison." His eyes flare at my use of his full name. I don't think I've ever said it to him before.

"My room is being packed now and will be delivered to your house tomorrow."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "We're not getting married for another three days. Wait until then."

His gray eyes turn stormy, but he just shrugs. "Up to you." He pauses a beat, then begrudgingly holds his hand out to Dad. "Dominic."

Dad shakes his hand, a look in his eyes that he reserves only for me and Declan. Yeah, so Dad sees that Charlie doesn't fuck with his son either. "Good to see you, kid. How's everything going?"

Kai looks nonplussed, as if Dad asked him the answer to the mysteries of life and not about his day. He stammers, then says, "Good. Thanks for asking. If you'll excuse me." He motions to his bodyguard and they both head out.

Charlie follows him with his gaze, his eyebrows a slash on his forehead. "You're gonna have your hands full with that one. Fair warning, he's practically useless. You'll do well to dump that little construction company he has. It's a drain on the business. Or convince him to hand it over. I keep telling him to let me turn it around, but he's fucking stubborn."

My eyebrows dip as I look between Dad and Charlie. From what we discussed the other day, Charlie suggested I use the construction company on some of our new builds. What the fuck is he pulling? Dad gives me a half shrug. I turn back to Charlie, more wary of him now. He's up to something; I just don't know what. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll check the books and see what can be cut if it's hemorrhaging money."

Charlie's face reddens as he turns to me with angry eyes. "I just said—"

I step closer to him, not willing to put up with his shit. He isn't my dad, and he sure as shit can't order me around—I'm not fucking Kai. "And *I* just said I'll check the fucking books. As of today, nothing that Kai does concerns you. None of his business concerns you. If he has issue with his company, as his husband, *I'll* fix it. Is that clear?"

Charlie's bodyguards step closer, but so do mine and Dad's. No one moves for a few breaths. I don't back down. Even though I loathe Kai, Charlie is too hands on when he doesn't need to be. I won't tolerate that shit.

"What did you say?" Charlie seethes, his eyes narrowed.

"You heard me. That company will belong to me and my husband. You have no say in it. Keep fucking pushing and I'll call this whole fucking marriage off, the war be damned. You need us as much as we need you, but I'm willing to blow all this shit up if you don't step the fuck off."

"Enough," Dad says, stepping between us. "No one is calling anything off. Charlie, don't take this truce for weakness. You won't threaten my son in front of me again."

Charlie looks back and forth between the two of us, Dad's face a mask of indignation as he stares him down. Their dislike for each other bleeds through their gazes, but they know they need each other, so neither makes a move.

Then Charlie throws his hands up. "Don't look for me to bail you out when it fails."

"You'd be the last person I'd ask for water if I were on fire," I tell him calmly. He glares at me before he storms out behind his son.

Sighing, Dad watches him leave, shaking his head. "Wanna not piss off your father-in-law?"

I bark a laugh and throw my arm around his shoulder. We walk out together. "Fuck that guy. You see how he treated Kai?"

Dad looks at me in surprise. "Almost sounds like you care."

"Not likely," I grunt. "This marriage isn't about me caring about him. It's about our survival. Kai and I will interact only as much as we need to. How his father treats him ain't my concern. But how Charlie treats *me* is. I won't allow it. I'll fucking bury Charlie St. Clair before I allow him to disrespect me."

"Agreed. Let's just get past this war before you think about offing your father-in-law, okay?"

I chuckle. "No promises."

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CHAPTER 7



CARTER

right lights shine down on me and Kai as we stand in front of a bunch of motherfuckers we don't know. His face is set in a mask of indifference, though the sweaty palms that he keeps rubbing on his pants says differently.

The wedding venue is decorated to within an inch of its life, flowers and other adornments choking off every square inch that's visible. The pews are packed with men dressed in sharp suits and women with elegant dresses and jewelry on their wrists, ears and around their necks that can be seen from space. Anyone that is anyone is here, and I hate it.

After taking a glance around the room, my eyes land on the man I'm set to marry. I can't deny it, Kai looks good. His black suit and crisp white shirt —the same thing I'm wearing—is more fitted than mine, his muscles on display. His arms look as if they'll burst the seams of his jacket. I won't lie, that show of his form is hot as fuck.

I'd rather eat a bullet than tell him that.

His long blond hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail, which shows the high contours of his cheeks and brings out the gray of his eyes. His plump lips are set in a hard line, making a dimple I didn't know he had pop out.

If it were up to me, Kai and I would have gone down to the justice of the peace and signed the paperwork and been done with it. But Dad and Charlie said having a large wedding would send a bigger message. Some rival families are here out of respect to witness our union. Any one of them could be the ones after my family. I don't trust any of these bastards that are seated here today, but we prohibited guns, and everyone was searched at the door. We all also have on bulletproof vests. We're as safe as we can be.

The wedding officiant's words cut through my musings, and I have to keep my snarl to myself. I can't wait for all of this to be over so I can go back to ferreting out who the fuck is after my family.

"We are gathered here to recognize the union between these two men, Kaison St. Clair and Carter Whitlock. If there is anyone here who do not want to see these two together, speak now or forever hold your peace."

Kai raises an eyebrow at me, and I mirror it, daring him to say he's not going to go through with it. In this, I would follow his lead. But he just smirks and looks pointedly at the wedding officiant.

After a respectful pause, the officiant continues. "Do you, Carter Whitlock, take Kaison St. Clair, as your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, through sickness and in health, from this day until the end of your days?"

I swallow past a dry throat. "I do."

"And do you, Kaison St. Clair, take Carter Whitlock, as your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, through sickness and in health, from this day until the end of your days?"

"Yeah." I raise an eyebrow at his flippancy, and he glares at me. Through clenched teeth, he says, "I do."

The officiant looks at him for a few beats but continues quickly when Kai shoots him a death glare. "Can we have the rings please?"

Declan hands me the ring as Nico hands Kai his. They're black titanium rings that Dad gave me, saying he commissioned them just for us. Whatever. One less thing I have to pay for, I guess.

"Now repeat after me," the officiant says. "With this ring, I thee wed."

Grabbing Kaison's sweaty hand, I slide the heavy ring on the third finger of his left hand. "With this ring," I say looking up at him, "I thee wed."

Once the ring is on his finger, he slides the ring on my finger, not breaking eye contact. "With this ring, I thee wed."

"By the power vested in me by the state of New Jersey, I now pronounce you husbands. You may now kiss the groom."

I wrap my arm around Kai's waist, wanting to get this over and done with so I never have to touch his lips again. It's already too much that we

can't skip this part. I'm willing to admit that I tried to find any reason not to kiss Kai, but Dad just looked at me, told me to stop being a bitch and kiss him to seal our union. My pride stung at Dad thinking I was a bitch.

He stiffens in my arms, but I don't care. I lower my lips to his and peck him lightly.

But Kai isn't having that. The fucker threads his fingers in my hair and holds me steady, forcing my lips open with his tongue. I pull against him, but before I can get away, he bites down hard.

Hissing, I snatch my lips away, looking at him with all the anger I can muster as I swallow down the coppery taste of my blood. He looks back at me evenly, a small smile on his face, like he's one upped me. We've been at each other's throats for years; he should know better than to think he can beat me.

I grip him by the back of his neck and pull him in for another kiss, shoving my tongue into his mouth, dragging it across his. We exchange the metallic taste of my blood, Kai's body betraying him as he slides closer to me. His hard dick brushes against my leg, the firm length rigid against my thigh.

I pull away from the kiss, thumbing his lower lip to clean a bit of blood that's stained his face. Kai drags dazed eyes over to me, then they infuse with agitation before he slaps my hand away.

The officiant raises his voice so everyone can hear him. "I now present to you, Mr. and Mr. St. Clair-Whitlock."

Hand in hand, Kai and I walk down the aisle amongst the fake cheers and phony smiles of our guests. With the exception of Dad and Charlie—since they were able to protect their families—no one else is happy for us. They'd probably rather be anywhere else than seeing this sham marriage.

I'm in agreement with them.

When we step into the hallway, Kai drops my hand and rubs it against his pants as if to wipe away my touch. I don't care. He can pretend to hate my touch all he wants, but now I know the truth. Kai got hard for me from a kiss. His body doesn't lie. He might hate me, but he wants me. I can't wipe the smug look from my face, no matter how much he glares.



LOUD MUSIC BLARES through the speakers at the reception, though no one dances. Everyone is too busy sitting at the round tables with elaborate centerpieces, stuffing their faces with the best food money can buy.

Kai and I sit at the table at the head of the reception hall. He looks as disinterested as I feel. Only another hour or so and I can get out of here, out of this suit and into clothes that feel like me.

And I can get away from my husband.

I can't believe I'm married. I look down at the black titanium ring on my finger and wish like hell I could take it off and toss it away, but I have to keep up the appearance that we're happily married, a single unit that will ride or die for each other. I notice Kai looking at his as well, a curious expression on his face. What thoughts are running through that blond head of his?

As I wait for the cue from Dad that I can get the fuck out of here, I look around at the people that are assembled. Is one of them responsible for this farce? Are they the reason I'm married to my enemy, tying myself to him to keep my family alive? Is someone that wants to see our downfall in the crowd?

The clinking of a fork on a glass draws my attention to the DJ booth and I glare over at Charlie. He doesn't pay me any mind, a phony smile pasted on his face as he glance around at those assembled. "Thank you all for coming today," he says, his annoying voice weaseling its way into my ears. It grates on my fucking nerves. If I could go the rest of my life without hearing it, I'd die a happy man. "I'm glad to give my son away to Carter Whitlock, who I know will treat him with love and respect for the rest of their lives."

Something about what Charlie says nags at my brain. He sounds almost gleeful about no longer having to deal with Kai on a daily basis.

I glance over at Kai, who has his hand wrapped so tightly around the glass in his hand that I fear it'll break. When he meets my gaze, he lets the brief flash of hurt bleed from his eyes and adopts a bored expression. But I saw it. I saw the pain from his father's words. Again, a heavy feeling settles in my belly, and I fucking resent it. It doesn't matter that he's hurt. It doesn't fucking matter.

"Now, if you'll join me in a toast to the happy couple," Charlie continues, holding his drink out to us. "I wish you both many, *many* years

of happiness, as husbands." He sips his drink, his hard gaze locked on Kai. Something passes between them that I can't decipher.

From the side of my mouth, I ask, "What the fuck was that?" Kai just shakes his head, and sits back, running a hand over his ponytail. I leave it alone. He might be my husband, but he's not my responsibility.

Dad steps up next, almost snatching the mic from Charlie's hand. They glare at each other for a moment, then Dad turns to our table with a small grin. "You look great, kid," he says and I smile at him, dipping my head. "I never thought you'd be getting married, and I didn't think I'd be getting another son. Kai, welcome to the family, kid. I can't wait to get to know you. I know you'll make my son very happy, as he will you."

I know these are empty words, meant to make others think this is a marriage of love, not convenience, but I think Dad chose those words on purpose. We both see what a piece of fucking work Charlie is and how poorly he treats Kai.

Normally, this isn't a business of love. Fathers raise their sons to take over for them, to run the families like a well-oiled machine, devoid of any emotions. That's not how I was raised and I'm still one of the most feared men on this side of the Mississippi. I hate myself for admitting it, but seeing how different Charlie's relationship with Kai is than mine with Dad's rubs me the wrong way.

Kai looks at Dad with a confused expression, probably wondering what his angle is. But there never is an angle with Dad. What you see is what you get. Our families may have been at odds for decades, but Dad is looking at the bigger picture. Kai will be around far longer than Charlie if the natural order of things transpires. Why not get to know his son-in-law if they're going to work together? I don't want to get to know him, but Dad isn't as short sighted as me.

"To the St. Clair-Whitlocks," Dad says, holding up his glass. "May your futures be bright."

People echo his words and drink. We take a sip of our champagne dutifully.

I'm ready to go and I lean over to tell Kai that we need to leave, but the DJ announces it's time for our first dance.

Knowing I have to dance at least once with my new husband, I stand and hold my hand out to him. Kai grudgingly places his palm in mine, and I lead us to the dance floor. The DJ puts on some slow jam, and we wrap our arms around each other's waist, swaying back and forth to the music.

It's fucking awkward. I want to be anywhere but here, staring into Kai's eyes like he's the only man in the world for me. That couldn't be further from the truth.

With a crooked smile, he whispers, "Don't get any bright ideas, asshole. There will be no consummating this marriage. Your dick will stay dry until we divorce, or I die. And I plan on you beating me to the grave."

I bark a laugh, and I know it looks as if we're having a loving conversation. "Judging from how your cock is trying to bruise my thigh right now, I'd think you were ready to fuck me in front of all these people. Or take my dick." I give him a thoughtful look. "Yeah, you look like you'd let me pound you into the floor." I lean closer to his ear. "Keep dreaming, dear husband. Hell will freeze over before I bless you with the dicking of your life."

"You're full of yourself. I'm betting you're overcompensating."

"You'll never find out."

Thankfully the song ends, and we separate. I watch in amusement as Kai tries to discreetly rearrange himself in his pants. The tight briefs I have on keep my secret.

We don't stay much longer after that. I thought it was risky to even have a reception, but I was ignored. Having too many of us in the same place isn't wise, but the day ends without bloodshed, so my apprehension was unfounded.

Kai and I take separate cars, Gavin riding with me. That bodyguard that's permanently attached to Kai's hip is moving in with us as well. So, along with me and Gavin, two other men full of testosterone will be under my roof. What could possibly go wrong?

Gavin looks at me a smirk playing on his lips. "Mr. St. Clair-Whitlock. How does it feel to be a married man?"

"Kiss my ass, Gavin."

He turns serious. "It'll be fine. You don't really have to be faithful to him or nothing. You don't even have to like that cocksucker."

"I know. I just haven't wrapped my mind around the whole thing, even though I've had time to. It's a terrible idea to have Kai under the same roof as me. We can barely go without socking each other in public. This house will be a fucking bloodbath if he pops his usual shit." Gavin shrugs. "Just stay out of each other's way."

"He's in my house. He better stay out of my way."

We pull up to the house, Kai's car right behind mine. A moving truck sits in the driveway, and I scowl at it. I can't wait to find out who is behind the threats of war on our families. I'll fucking skin them alive for forcing me and Kai together like this.

Kai climbs out of his car, looking up at my place with a blank expression. Despite how he tries to cover it, I know he's impressed. I had the place built when I was twenty-one and it's still a showstopper. The two-story modern house with large bullet proof windows that allows tons of natural light gives the house an airy look. From the outside, the large chandeliers in the foyer and sitting room are visible as well as the artwork on the wall. All the bedrooms are upstairs, each with the same large windows as the bottom floor. The bedrooms are also equipped with a hidden entrance to my panic room in the basement.

I'll show Kai that one day. Right now, I want away from him. I can still feel the ghost of his lips against mine.

After giving my place the once over, he looks at me. "Where do I sleep?"

I motion for him to follow me without a word. I wave the bracelet on my wrist against the sensor on the door and it pops open. "Is that smart?" he asks, stepping inside behind me. "What if the power goes out?"

I sigh and turn to him. "That's what keys are for. Don't come in here trying to change shit. This is my house now and it'll be my house when you leave. Got it?"

He nods with a small grin on his face. "Got it. My room? You're not expecting us to share, are you?" The look of horror on his face is genuine, mirroring my own.

Scoffing, I jog up the stairs to the room furthest from mine. "Fuck no. You're going nowhere near my room." I push open the door and let him walk through. "Sleep here. And stay the fuck out of my way."

With that, I stroll to my room to try to forget my horrible wedding day.

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CHAPTER 8



KAI

weat drips down my face as the pounding of my feet on the treadmill fills the gym. The music blasting through the speakers doesn't dim the sound of my sneakers thudding on the belt, running nowhere fast. I look over at Nico, who's hitting the punching bag, his headphones pressed hard into his ears.

Carter's house is fucking insane. Five bedrooms, seven bathrooms, including one in the gym. The massive gym takes up the entire basement. His kitchen is a dream, with modern appliances and a six-range burner. It looks wholly unused, so I've taken it over, cooking dinner almost every night and meal prepping for me and Nico.

He has a pool in the backyard with an inset bar and hot tub attached. I'm sure he uses none of it, judging by the way it's all so pristine and I know Carter doesn't trust anyone enough to throw a party to get any mileage out of it.

All of this gym equipment is top of the line, new and expensive. Of everything in this mausoleum he calls a house, this is the only place that looks well used. Judging from the state of his body, I can tell Carter puts the gym to good use.

Snarling, I step off the quickly moving treadmill belt, putting my feet to the side of the running belt so I can catch my breath. I slam my hand on the emergency stop button, then lean my head on my arms.

Fucking Carter. I despise him, but thinking about him holding me down and fucking me into a mattress has been the object of my fantasies for the past few weeks. It's only made worse with how he held me on our wedding day and forced his bloodied tongue into my mouth. Tasting him like that sent a *need* burning through me that is undeniable. I won't act on it, but my hand is getting a workout all its own.

I wipe my face with the towel I snagged from beside the door of the gym and blow out a long breath. I've been trying to work off some excess energy, but it doesn't always work.

Hopping off the treadmill, I walk over to Nico and hold the bag. He up nods me, then goes back to hitting it. I plant my feet so the bag doesn't move too much.

After a few more hits, he bumps one of his earbuds from his ear with his shoulder. "What's the plan for today?" he asks, going back to hitting the bag.

"I have to go check out St. Clair's Construction today, see if that contract we wanted for that bar was granted."

St. Clair's Construction was my first acquisition when I was old enough to understand business. There will always be a need for construction, so it will always turn a profit. Greasing the right palms and paying for contracts helped get my company off the ground. Now word of mouth and good business in the past help keep my company in the black. In fact, I'm thinking about expanding.

I pause to allow him a few more punches. Nico is strong as shit. It's all I can do to hold the bag steady. "Then I want to go to The Devil's Den."

Nico stops mid punch and looks at me. "You think that's smart?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't it be?"

He looks down at my wedding band, which I haven't taken off since I got married. "Because you're Mr. St. Clair-Whitlock now."

"Two things. One," I say, holding up my index finger, "no one knows who I am down at The Devil's Den. And two," I aim my middle finger at him this time, flipping him off, "I'm not really married." I drop my hand. "I'm going out of my fucking mind here, man. He fucked up my last outing when I went. He won't fuck it up this time."

Nico shrugs and holds his hands out to me. I unlace his gloves and he tosses them in the basket by the free weights. "I'm going to use the rowing machine before I head up. Are you sticking around or are you done for the day?"

"I'm done. I'm going to shower and wait for you upstairs. We'll be out most of the day working at the construction company."

He nods as he pulls on the rowing machine, getting into the workout quickly.

I trot up the stairs, ready to eat one of my prepped meals so I can shower the grime of the workout away. I'm sweaty and sticky and hungry.

When I round the corner for the kitchen, I scowl. Carter is standing at the kitchen counter with a container in front of him, shoveling food into his mouth.

"What the fuck," I growl, rushing over to him. I push him away from my food and snatch it towards me, putting the top on it. "This is *my* food."

"I didn't see your name on it," he says around a mouth of chicken and rice.

"You knew you didn't cook it, so it's obviously not yours." I know I'm being petty, but I prepped my meals so I didn't have to cook after a long workout. If he wanted food, he should have made some. "Not like you use this kitchen anyway."

"Aw come on, dear husband," Carter says in a sarcastic tone, wrapping his arms around my waist. I push him off without hesitation. "Ain't it your duty to make sure your husband is fed?"

"Fuck off, Carter," I spit at him, tossing the food back at him and storming off.

He chuckles. "Someone is testy." Then he raises his voice, sounding more serious now. "I need to see your books for your construction company to see how much money it's bleeding every month."

I stop in my tracks. "What did you say?"

"I said I need to see your books. I'm an accountant, so I can see where your money is going and where you're fucking up."

Rage singing in my veins, I march back over to him, getting in his face. "There's nothing wrong with my company. And I don't need you to check shit out. I know what the fuck I'm doing."

Carter's face reddens as he pushes me away from him. I stumble back, my feet slipping in the food I tossed at him. "You need to back the fuck up. I'm sick of your shit, Kai. I'm trying to help you from running your fucking business into the ground. Just like your dad said you were."

Anger surges through me and on a roar, I deck Carter in the face. He holds his mouth, looking stunned for a moment. "My pop don't know shit!"

I yell, all the irritation I feel for Charlie St. Clair and how he shits on my company exploding out of me. Then I charge at him.

But Carter ducks and I fly over his back, landing on the dining room table. I curse, my back arching off the surface. He has some place settings there that he doesn't use and my back digs into the forks and knives and the saucers that didn't break under my weight.

He grabs me by my shirt and drags me to the floor, pulling items off the table as he does. A swift kick lands in my gut, and I wheeze. Before he can land another, I grab his foot and pull quickly, bringing him to the ground with me. A 'oomph' leaves his lips when his back hits the floor.

I roll on top of him, punching him in the mouth once, twice. Before I can land a third punch, he pushes me away, my hand landing on the floor beside his head. I hiss as pain jolts up my arm. Carter bucks me off him and I tumble over, sliding on the food and other debris that litters the floor.

Carter gets on top of me and puts his hand to my throat. He brings his face to mine, snarling. "There are only so many times I'll allow you to put your hands on me, Kai."

Grinning at him through a bloodied mouth, I say, "Fuck you," then headbutt him.

He curses and lets me go, holding his nose. I scramble up and pull him to his feet, twisting my hands in his shirt as I shove him against the pantry door. I bring him closer to me, until our noses are practically touching. "Don't you ever talk about my company again. You don't know shit."

We stand like this for a second, trading heavy bursts of air. Then our lips are pressed together, kissing frantically. Carter's hand threads through my loose hair and my hands slide up his back, gripping the muscles there. God, he's strong, and so hard.

Then I'm on flipped around, my back pressed hard to the door as he presses a thigh between my leg, but I couldn't give a fuck less about the change of position. Carter settles his chest against mine, rubbing his hard length against me as he attacks my mouth. His kisses are hard and brutal, and I soak them up, needing more.

It's wrong, wanting the man I've hated for years so strongly, but fuck, I can't stop. I want to pull away, but it's like my mouth is tethered to his, the only way I can survive is if he kisses me until I don't know my fucking name.

My head swims from lack of oxygen, but there's no way I'll break this kiss. Carter's tongue is in my mouth, with his hands all over me, and it sets my fucking soul alight. He pulls harder on my hair, the motion stinging my scalp. It only makes me kiss him harder, my fingers sinking into his flesh. I'm sure I leave behind scratch marks.

Someone clearing their throats has us breaking apart, snatching our lips away from each other. My face heating, I push Carter away and meet the gaze of Nico, whose eyebrows are up to his hairline as he takes in the scene in front of him.

I glare over at Carter, his kiss swollen lips still wet. It takes all the power in my body not to draw that plump bottom lip into my mouth and suck at him. But I refrain, anger surging back into me when I think about what led to our fight.

Carter doesn't need to check behind me. Listening to Pop about *my* business is where he fucked up. For years, Pop has been trying to get his hands on my books, to check them over for himself. I've had to hire accountants that aren't a part of the family, so he wasn't privy to my earnings. For some reason, he's dead set on getting his hands on the company I poured my blood, sweat and tears into. I won't allow it, and I won't allow Carter to help him do it.

Not bothering to keep the disdain from my tone, I say, "You're not going anywhere near my books. Mind your fucking business, *husband*." With that, I storm off, brushing past Nico, who follows closely behind me.

When we get to the second-floor landing, he jogs to catch up to me. "I take it the trip to The Devil's Den is out?"

"You're a pain in my ass," I mutter to him, slamming my door in his face. His dark chuckle greets me from the other side of the door.

I strip off my sweaty clothes and drop them in the hamper, then pad to my bathroom naked. My cock is still hard from kissing Carter. My lips still tingle from how his felt on mine. His taste lingers on my tongue.

Stepping under the hot spray, I immediately grab the lube that I've stashed in there and drizzle some in my hand and onto my fingers.

A hiss leaves my lips when my hand wraps around my cock. I stroke quickly, the memory of Carter touching and kissing me fresh in my mind. I stuff two fingers, then three, into my hole, fucking myself against my digits.

Anger still simmers just below my skin at the thought of the one person I shouldn't want being the one that does it for me. I've never been close to

coming from a kiss. I've never thought about someone holding me down and fucking me so hard I scream their name like I think about Carter. His hard, hot hands on my body, so possessive and holding me with such ownership. I've never had anyone touch me like that before.

I drop my head, moaning as I jerk and fuck myself faster. The thought of Carter's hand on me, gripping me with such possession. His mouth owning me, not giving me the chance to even breathe from his closeness. All of it culminates to an earth-shattering orgasm that has my back bowing and a loud groan tearing from my lips. My hole clinches around my fingers, fluttering as I try to impale myself further.

White ropes of my spunk spray over the wall and I look at it in shame. Fuck, why does Carter fucking Whitlock have my head all fucked up?

I snap my washcloth up, cleaning myself roughly. My hands are almost violent in my hair as I wash it, my fingers pulling at the strands without regard. It feels nothing like how Carter did, when he gripped the tresses.

Clean and still pissed off—even after an amazing orgasm—I get out of the shower and get dressed in a fitted suit. I think about how Carter rarely wears suits—cargo pants, fitted shirts and combat boots his outfit of choice. He looks good in both. But he looks unbelievable in a suit. His dark hair and all those tattoos contrast so sharply with their perfect fit. Over the years, anytime I caught him in one, I'd get one hell of a boner. It hasn't stopped now.

The entire time we were standing in front of all those people we didn't know in that stupid fucking wedding hall, my cock was half hard as I stared at my husband.

Before I can think more about what I want Carter to do to me, I pull my door open and head out. Nico opens his door at the same time, stepping into the hallway with me. His room is right next to mine and the walls aren't too thick, so I'm sure he heard me coming my brains out. Whatever. In all the years he's been my right-hand man and my closest friend, as well as my bodyguard, I'm sure he's heard worse.

"To the construction company?" Nico asks a little too innocently.

"Yeah. Gotta call Pop to see if he's heard anything on the streets about these threats. I've gotten fuck all from my contacts."

Nico says, "I've been checking in with Jared," my father's main bodyguard who Nico has been working closely with for years, "and he said things are quiet. Too quiet." Carter steps out of his room just before we hit the stairs. His cheeks turn red when he looks at me, but his eyes are steady. Fuck, he's feeling it too. My heart thumps against my rib cage as I stare at him.

Against my better judgement, my eyes drop to his mouth, and I can't stop thinking about how they feel.

Fuck it. We're married. We're stuck in this house together and I want to fuck him. I don't have to like him to get off.

"Nico, I'll meet you downstairs. I need a word with my husband."

Thankfully, my friend dips his head and walks away.

Carter's eyes are guarded as he looks at me. "What?"

I push past him and step into his office. After a few beats, he walks in behind me and shuts the door. I turn around and take long strides over to him. Carter holds his hands up as if thinks I'll fight him. Yeah, that's good foreplay, but we've already done that.

Batting his hands away, I step into his space and kiss him hard.

Carter freezes initially, then snaps out of it, wrapping one arm around me and thrusting the other hand into my hair. He walks me backwards until the backs of my legs hit his desk. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, dragging it along mine in a rough, teasing way. I moan in his mouth, arching into him.

Breaking the kiss, Carter spins me around and plants my hands on his desk. He reaches around to the front of my pants, undoing them quickly. Fuck yes. He wants it too.

"Just because I want to fuck your ass," he says, pressing his hard cock against me, "doesn't mean anything. You're still the bane of my fucking existence."

"Don't care," I pant. "Just fuck me already."

Carter roughly pulls my pants down and spits against my hole. When he stuffs two fingers inside me, he chuckles gruffly. "Did you get yourself ready for me, dear husband?"

"Fuck you." I didn't, but it's a stroke of luck that I fingered myself in the shower. "Your cock, Carter. Give me what I want."

He stands and presses his body to mine, his hand drifting up to my throat. "So needy. Have you always been like this? Something I don't know about you, St. Clair?"

"Carter, I swear to god," I grumble, pushing my ass back against his groin. I reach back and spear my hands in his hair, gripping tight. "Take

your dick out and fuck me. I need to get you out of my system."

For once, he does what I say without complaint, fumbling in his pants with his free hand. He spits again between us, getting saliva on the top of my crack. He runs his cockhead through it, then drags it down to my hole.

In one swift motion, he pushes into me, only stopping when he's balls deep in my ass. "Fuck," we groan together. My back arches as I push back against him. I've never felt so fucking full. Never felt like I'd be split apart so thoroughly.

Carter's hand tightens around my throat as he pulls back and slams forward into my aching hole hard. Over and over, he pumps into me, his heavy balls slapping against mine.

I clamp my lips shut, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing just what he's doing to me, but Carter is having none of it. "Let me hear you, Kai. You have so much to say any other time."

I hum as he pounds into me, holding back as much as I can.

Then he stops his frantic pounding and rolls his hips, fucking me slow. It's so unexpected that my breath shoots from my lungs, the urge to beg him to keep fucking me like this on the tip of my tongue.

Then he says, "Come on, Kai. Moan for me, baby."

My body jerks, a hard shudder rolling through me. No one has called me baby while we were fucking and actually sounded like they *meant* it. Usually, it's that bullshit sex talk that was meaningless, but hot as fuck in the moment. Hearing it from Carter? Fuck, it's almost too much.

My control fucking snaps and my lips part, a loud groan sounding in the room. Carter chuckles darkly and I would feel embarrassed if he didn't feel so fucking good. "Just like that. So fucking good when you listen." He grips my hip hard, plowing into my hole like he owns me. "Fuck, Kai. Squeeze that tight fucking hole around my dick." I do what he tells me, trying to strangle his cock. "I'm close. You'd better come before I do."

He doesn't need to give me directions in that area. With how he's pegging my prostate, it'll only take—

His teeth sink down hard into my shoulder and the bite of pain shoots pleasure down my spine to the head of my dick. "Carter, I'm coming. Fuck, keep fucking me like that. Like...that....fuccccccck!"

My cock kicks off, spraying my cum all over the desk. My body shudders from the force of my orgasm. Hands down, it's the best orgasm of my life and I came hands free. It's the first time that's ever happened.

With a long growl, Carter stills behind me, and I can feel his hot cum spraying against my walls. He rests his head between my shoulder blades, breathing in deeply. Almost as if he's taking in my scent.

This shouldn't feel so good. Not the sex, but this bit that not even air can pass between us, it's everything.

What the fuck is going on? Why, of all people, is Carter the one to make me feel whole? After sex, I usually felt like I wanted to get away as quickly as possible, to be by myself to come down from my orgasm high.

Now? I don't want to move. What is *wrong* with me?

Carter pulls his dick out of me and replaces it with two fingers in my ass, shoving his cum in deeper. I groan hoarsely, my voice gone from all the moaning and babbling. "I want you to walk around with my cum in you all day. You'll smell like me. You'll feel me. Everyone will know I fucking own you."

"I hate you," I say with another groan.

He chuckles and nips my shoulder once more. "Doesn't mean I don't fucking own you." He removes his fingers and stuffs them in my mouth. I suck on his fingers greedily, dragging my tongue over his digits to collect all of his taste. When they're clean of his spunk, he pulls his fingers roughly from my mouth and slaps my ass hard. "Now get out of my office. I have shit to do today that doesn't include you."

The sting of his dismissal shouldn't resonate so deeply in me, but I know he felt that connection between us. I know because of how reluctant he was to remove his hand from around my waist and lift his head from my shoulders.

But fuck him. All I needed was his cock once to get him out of my system. Now that I got what I wanted, we can go back to what we were before: enemies that happen to be married.

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CHAPTER 9



CARTER

ending Kai over my desk and fucking him senseless was a terrible fucking idea. It's all I can think about, even two weeks later. It's clouding my judgment, and I've been making stupid mistakes at work. A few times, one of the lower accountants that works at Azure Blue had to come to me with an error I made or one I didn't catch when I was going over the books. One thing I've prided myself on is my work, but all I can think about is how tight Kai's ass was.

I've never fucked anyone that felt so fucking good, so fucking hot inside that I almost lost my head. Ever since my dick was in him, I feel... something. A buzzing under my skin every time he's near. An awareness before he even steps in any room I'm in. It's like my cum is a beacon inside him and I feel a jolt in my system when he's close by.

Gavin has noticed my behavior, making snide remarks every time my head snaps around to Kai. I try not to make it obvious, but I can't help it. I marked him, so now he belongs to me.

But that's a foolish thought. I spent years, decades even, hating him. Hating his family. How can one fuck have me so goddamned confused? And why do I want to fuck him again?

It won't happen. He said one fuck to get me out of his system and that's all he'll get. Even if I want nothing more than to sink into that tight hole of his and fuck him until he cries. Then I'll lick his tears and make it all better for him.

No, I don't want to make anything better for him. I want Kai the fuck away from me, so I don't have these conflicted feelings. Kaison St. Clair is the enemy. Even though we're married with this bullshit truce, he'll always be the enemy.

"Ready?" Gavin asks, checking his guns as he waits by my office door.

I log out of my computer at Azure Blue and stand. I pull my suit jacket on—something Dad was happy to see me in—and check that my weapon is hidden. Even though there hasn't been much chatter about the family after us, I don't want to take any chances. A threat could be anywhere; I don't want to be caught with my pants down when it appears.

We leave through the service entrance of the casino to ensure no one sees us and Gavin hurriedly drives off once he's behind the wheel of my bulletproof sedan.

He drives down the expressway, weaving in and out of traffic before he exits on the highway and goes back the way we came. After he's sure no one is following us, Gavin drives at a more sedate speed until we get to St. Clair's Constructions headquarters.

Kai doesn't know I'm coming, but I figure the element of surprise will be on my side and he'll let me look over his books. Something about what Charlie keeps saying about signing over the company to him is tripping up my spidey senses. It's almost like he's trying to sabotage his son's business. I think he doesn't want to see Kai succeed. He already gives him shit for being gay—maybe he thinks that because he doesn't conform to what he thinks he should, Kai shouldn't have anything. I want to make sure my assumptions are correct.

As we drive, I see sign after sign for Kai's construction company outside of vacant or in process builds. If his company was doing too badly, no matter who he paid off, he wouldn't be getting contracts. Something is off about this entire situation.

We pull up to Kai's company about thirty minutes later. The headquarters is about twenty minutes away from us, in a smaller, less busy city called Abway. It's a good location for a legitimate business. Even though the name is connected to the St. Clair family, it's separate from the illegal shit we do with the drugs, guns, and murder.

I don't see Kai's car, but that's probably for the best. I won't have to fight him to see what I want. Any stooges that are in here now will back the fuck down when Gavin puts a gun to their heads.

That's not necessary though. I step into the office and see a small pale man with large glasses and a frightened air around him sitting in a small office. Judging from the pallor of his skin, I doubt he gets out much besides coming in to work.

"Can I help you?" he asks, pushing his glasses up on his nose. Gavin runs his eyes over him with his eyebrows knitted together. I'm not sure what the look is for, but I don't want to ask. I won't be distracted by my weird friend.

Turning to the man, I answer his question. "I'm Carter St. Clair-Whitlock. I'm—"

"The boss's husband. Yeah, I know." He pushes his glasses up again. "He's not here. Do you want me to leave a message?"

"No. I need to see his account ledgers."

"Okay. Would you like to use his office or the accountant's?" That was easier than I thought.

"His." I step further into the room. "Who are you?"

"Oh. I'm Percy. Mr. St. Clair's assistant. My dad works for his dad."

Huh. He looks like he's afraid of his own shadow. I'm sure whoever his dad is treats him how Charlie treats Kai. This isn't a business for the weak, but it's the fault of the father for not preparing him.

"Where is everyone else?"

"Everyone is off for the rest of the day. They just finished a build for the convenience store in Salsey."

He shows me into Kai office, which is neat as a pin. I breathe in deeply, catching a faint whiff of the cologne he wears. It has burrowed into my senses since I fucked him.

When I'm settled behind his desk, Percy boots up Kai's computer and inputs a password. "It's my password, but I have access to everything Mr. St. Clair does. If you need anything else, let me know."

I nod and take off my jacket, settling in for a long few hours. Kai's business has been open for a while, so I have to go back to the beginning to see if there are any discrepancies.

After I boot up the software, I go through the ledgers. I call Percy in to grab me a notepad and a pen and get to work. I faintly hear him and Gavin talking, Percy's voice high and frightened, but I tune them out.

Two hours later, I rub my dry eyes and glance down at the notes I've taken. I'm not sure what Charlie is talking about. Kai's business is

extremely profitable. He's making money hand over fist, spending money on quality items, but getting them at a bargain. He pays his employees above minimum wage, while still retaining a maximum workforce. To put it shortly, Kai has a good mind for business. Which leaves me to wonder what the fuck is Charlie on about. I'll have to dig more into it, see what the real problem is.

There's also an issue with the books that I'm sure Kai doesn't know about. Despite him saying he doesn't need my help, that's the furthest thing from the truth. His bottom line is off. By almost twenty thousand dollars this month, close to thirty last month. If I'm right—and I know I am—someone is stealing money from Kai.

Shaking my head, I go back to the front of the office where I see Percy taking frightened glances at Gavin. Gavin is only slightly larger than me, but his shrewd brown eyes and the hard set to his face ensures most people are scared of him. I'm used to seeing his mug, so his permascowl means nothing to me. I thought I heard them talking a few hours ago, but maybe my mind was playing tricks on me.

"Let's go, Gavin. Thanks, Percy. And do me a favor."

"Ye-yes sir?" His voice trembles and I have to fight not to chuckle.

"Don't tell your boss I was here. I'll tell my husband myself."

He sighs gratefully and nods. "Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

When we get to the car, Gavin gives me a long look. "I see you're getting used to that word."

"What word?" I ask, though I know exactly what he's talking about.

"Husband." I scowl. "Don't sweat it, boss. You two would actually make a good couple if you stop throwing punches all the time."

I scoff, though it's half-hearted. Ever since I stuck my dick in him, I've been thinking the same thing. No denying that our sex was hot. It was like Kai was made for me, his hole molding around the shape of my dick. And his moans. God, his moans. They burrowed into my brain, the memory of them cropping up at the most inopportune times. I've been walking around with a semi ever since we fucked.

"It'll never work. We hate each other."

Gavin smirks as he pulls away from Kai's company. "Do you?"

I don't answer, just stare out the window at the scenery passing me by. Do I hate Kai? Have I ever? I'll venture to say I don't really know him. His family and mine have been at odds since before I was born. It was expected of me to not like the enemy.

But he's not the enemy anymore. He's my husband. We're supposed to be allies. What's the point of us being miserable when we're stuck together for years, decades even?

Fuck, it's all so perplexing. Sex always confuses things, and my head is all fucked up. Namely because I want more. Unfortunately for me, Kai said once to get me out of his system.

I clear thoughts of my husband from my mind when we pull up to the warehouse to meet with the Colombians an hour later. My other men are parked in an SUV already waiting for me with the product. I had them meet me here since I was going to Kai's company beforehand. Going over his budget was nagging at me, so that had to be done before I took care of my real business.

Hopping out of the car, I motion for my guys in the other car to bring the product inside.

Dante Lopez, the head of the Colombian family stands by a row of tables, his men and workers behind him. He grins when he sees me, holding his hand out for me to shake. Out of all the families that have territory in our small slice of South Jersey, Dante and I get along best. I know his family is content to run his business far away from Yorkley where our territory is.

"Good to see you, Carter," Dante says, his deep Jersey accent sounding familiar. Like me, he does business for his father to prepare to take over one day. "You're early."

I nod and incline my head to my guys so they can put the cases of heroin, coke and pills on the floor by Dante's feet. "We have some trouble down in our part of the city, so I wanted to make sure you had what you needed before shit went south."

"Shit," he says, shaking his head. "We've heard faint whispers of trouble in your area. Any ideas of who it is?"

"Vague ideas," I tell him honestly. "It's nothing we can't handle."

Dante steps forward, dropping his voice. "If I hear anything, I'll let you know. Since we are so far away, there's not much I can do from here. But I'll help where I can."

I clap hands with him and pull him in for a one-armed hug. "Thanks Dante. We'll keep our ear to the streets."

His men bring out the cases of money and transport them to the SUV. Dante and I talk about his next delivery, then we head out.

Kai is on my mind as we drive back to Jersey. Well, not him. His company. Someone is skimming off the top. I don't like Kai, but I hate stealing even more. If the St. Clair's are anything like us, they pay their people handsomely to earn their loyalty. Judging from how much money the company rakes in, I'm sure Kai pays more than what is state mandated. That means he has a greedy bastard on his payroll that thinks he's worth more than he's paid.

I'll have to take over as lead accountant for him. He probably delegates the responsibility, expecting his people to be loyal. But he shouldn't be stupid.

"Take me to see Kai," I tell Gavin. "I need to—"

My words are cut off by a large explosion in front of us. The car that has my money and my men in it shoots into the air, now turned into a metal fireball.

Gavin wrenches the wheel of our car to the left, barely avoiding the SUV as it falls to the ground. "Out of the car, now!" he yells when he slams on brakes.

I do what he says, stumbling out of the car, grabbing my gun as I run across the pavement. The warning came not a moment too soon. I'm barely ten feet away when our car suffers the same fate, erupting into a ball of fire.

I'm thrown onto my back, the fiery air singing my face and racking against my lungs.

With effort, I roll onto my back, trying to find where the attack came from. I make out two figures running towards a sleek sedan, one with a rocket launcher over their shoulder. They have on masks, covering any identifying markers I could pick up to try to suss out what family they belong to. The license plate of the car is also covered, so I can't make that out either.

How the fuck did they know we were here? We're on the back roads going back to Yorkley. A road we always take.

Fuck, we always take the same route, so it's not hard to deduce where we'll be when we leave town. How did neither Gavin nor I realize we were being followed? I looked through the rearview mirror and side mirrors often. How the fuck did they get the drop on us?

Clambering to my feet, I flick the safety off my gun and aim at the tires of the sedan. I fire off shot after shot, hoping to flatten one of the tires so I can catch up to them. I'm not sure how, but I'll find a way. I hit one tire, and the car spins out, but the driver is able to regain control of their car quickly and speed off.

"Fuck!" I shout to the air. I slide my gun back into the holster. Turning around, I see Gavin standing beside the road, surveying the damage while also checking our surroundings. The men in the lead car are beyond saving, the SUV an inferno of twisted metal.

I pull out my phone to call Dante. He's only about twenty minutes away. He and some of his men can get here faster than my family.

After I tell him what happened and he promises to send some guys to help us out, I call Dad to give him the news. "I'm not sure how they knew we were here, but they're fucking with us, Dad. They almost killed me and Gavin."

His voice is tight with emotion as he asks, "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Might not have any fucking eyebrows, but I'm good."

"Get back here as quickly as you can. You're not the only one that got hit. The St. Clair's did too. Indigo Arc Casino was hit with Molotov cocktails. The restaurant is burned to the ground, as well as the entrance to the main floor. Luckily, a waitress saw the person before he threw the cocktail, and she got everyone away from the doors. The restaurant was closed, so no casualties."

"Son of a bitch," I curse wildly, wanting to hit something. It would be easy for whoever is trying to take our territory to just off us and be done with it. So why are they playing these games? To fuck with us, that's why. It's *all* a game to them. They want us to know that they can do what they want because we can't do anything about it. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Dante and his guys show up a few minutes later. They're able to extinguish the flames and use a tow to get the twisted clumps of metal that used to be our vehicles on the back of the bed. I say a silent prayer for the men I lost today, remembering their names so I can pay my respects to their families. All arrangements will be taken care of by our family, of course.

Clean up takes almost three hours. Dante loans us one of his guys, having him drive us back to Yorkley. We don't speak the whole ride, my mind going a thousand miles an hour. I almost died. If Gavin hadn't ordered me out of the car, I would have.

I don't see any emergency vehicles when we pull up to the casino, but yellow tape is still stuck to the doors of the building. We head to the back entrance, trudging through the filthy alley.

We make our way to the small conference room, finding it packed with my family and the St. Clair's men. Voices bounce off the wall as everyone tries to be heard over the other.

When Dad spots me, he breaks away from conversation with Charlie, coming over to wrap his arms around me. He hugs me tight, sighing against my shoulder. "How are you, son?"

"I'm good, Dad. In one piece."

He pulls back and holds me at arm's length, nodding as he folds his lips in. "Yeah, you are. Good."

I look over his shoulder and see Kai watching me and Dad's exchange. His eyes hold a curious expression, as if what he's seeing doesn't make sense.

A pang shoots through me as our gazes clash, his gray eyes flashing with...something. He's so fucking hard to read. He holds his emotions close to the vest, and it fucking sucks because I need to know what's on his mind.

I force myself to look at Dad, to give him the rest of the bad news. "The money from the deal is gone. We lost almost three million today."

He curses, shaking his head. "Fuck. They really hit us hard. I'm glad you're okay though. That's more important than the money."

"Yeah, but that three million is coming out of my account."

"You bet your ass it is," Dad says with a bark of laughter.

Charlie comes over, looking angry. "I'm glad you can find humor in all this, Dominic. My fucking casino is fucked."

Dad turns to him with a raised eyebrow. "And my son almost died. I could give a fuck about your casino. You can rebuild."

"Use Kai's company," I pipe in. "It would save you millions instead of going with someone who will charge you an outrageous price."

Charlie waves me off as Kai approaches. "I would never. His materials are cheap, and he cuts corners. I'd rather use someone reputable."

With a snarl, I step into Charlie. "What the fuck is your problem? Why are you so against letting your fucking *son* help you? What kind of fucking *father*—"

Kai steps between us, facing me with his face twisted in irritation. "Chill out, Carter. You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Anger builds inside me as I stare at Kai. How can he take his father's side, knowing he's not only a shitty father, but a shitty businessman? He'd rather take an opportunity from his son than allow him to help him out. Who does that? Charles St. fucking Clair, that's who. Why my father thought it would be smart to attach ourselves to that fucking snake is beyond me. "Why are you letting him talk to you like that?"

From behind his son, Charlie says, "I'm just telling the truth. Kai knows it and I know it. The sooner he hands me over that debt trap, the better for this family. Or you can sell it and put money back into this family and stop wasting your fucking time with a venture that's not paying off."

I know for a fact that's not true. I saw the account ledgers. I know what Kai has and doesn't have, and that construction company is a fucking gold mine.

Kai swallows roughly before turning to Charlie. "I'm not selling. To you or anyone else. St. Clair's Construction is mine."

"Well change the fucking name and stop embarrassing this family with your failures." With that, Charlie stalks away, standing with my Dad and other men as they discuss what our next steps are.

"Kai," I say, reaching out for him.

"Don't." He snatches away and walks over to the gathering. I growl in frustration before I walk over and join the discussion.

Kai is a fucking idiot. Father or not, I wouldn't allow anyone to talk to me the way Charlie talks to him. Dad and I have gone toe to toe a number of times, but he'd never talk shit about me to the fucking enemy. Charlie takes some sort of sick pride in feeling like he's knocking Kai down a peg or two. I swear I hate that fucking cocksucker.

From what the waitress saw, a white man with dark sunglasses and shaggy brown hair threw the Molotov cocktail. That's not much to go on, since there are probably hundreds of men that fit that description from the Fensters and the Russians. Gavin and I didn't see anything worth noting, so we're all at square one.

The only thing we can do is meet with the Fensters and the Russians to try to sus out which one it might be. Dad and I still have our reservations about Juan and his family, but less so than the other two. We don't trust anyone, but the Reyes family seemed the least likely to encroach on our territory.

"I'll keep reaching out to try to get in touch with the Fensters and the Russians," Dad says when no one has any bright ideas. "Hopefully by the time we figure all this shit out, we're all still above ground."

We disperse, not having anything else to discuss.

When I spot Charlie heading out, I walk behind him, catching up to him when he gets to the burned out restaurant. It's covered in soot, most of the wall on the far end caved in from the height of the flames. It still smells strongly of smoke, so much so that I have to wave a hand in front of my face to get clear air.

Charlie glances over at me with a frown. "And you think my son's shitty company can fix this? You're fucking delusional."

"No, you're a fucking snake." Charlie turns to me with a venomous expression. He doesn't scare me. I meet his glare. "You just want his company for yourself. I see what you're doing. Keep disparaging him so he'll hand it over and you can take all the profits. How can you do that to your son? What, him being gay is that much of an issue that you don't think he deserves anything else?"

"He deserves to burn in hell for embarrassing me with his perversion. My son, a fucking queer. How can any father stand to look at their kid when he turns out like that? All I've given him, and he likes dick."

I rear back, looking at him incredulously. "You're a fucking idiot." His face reddens further, and his hand goes to the inside of his jacket. But I'm quicker. My gun is out and aimed at his forehead. Charlie freezes. "Don't you fucking dare. You listen to me, and you listen good. Kai is mine. You will not talk to him anymore. You won't come near him again. You're done."

"Too fucking easy," Charlie snarls. "You can have him."

"I already do."

Kai chooses that moment to round the corner. "What the fuck? Carter, put your fucking gun down!" He rushes over and pushes my hand away, standing in front of Charlie. "What the fuck!"

"Your husband is just showing me who's in charge, that's all," Charlie says easily. "Think about what I said, Kai. Give me that company and I'll turn it around for you." Then he saunters away without a backwards glance.

"You're out of line," Kai snarls, stepping into my space. "You don't get to threaten my dad because you have a bug up your ass." "Well, excuse me for making sure your father doesn't snatch your company from under you. Newsflash, Kai, he's trying to take your company because it's profitable."

"Don't you think I know that?" he whisper shouts. "I know him better than you do."

"Yeah? Then you'll know no matter how much you kiss his ass and try to be the perfect son, he'll never fucking love you. Why do you insist on trying to get his approval when you'll *never* get it?"

Kai rears back as if I slapped him. Hurt flashes in his eyes, and he's not quick enough to cover it.

"Shit," I say, my heart squeezing for a reason I can't pin down. "Kai—" "Fuck you, Carter," he says through clenched teeth, then storms off.

I watch him leave, my stomach sinking to my feet.

Before I can go after him, Nico jogs behind him, shooting me a look over his shoulder. I flip him the bird, which makes him scoff. At lease he'll have someone with him while I try to figure out how to fix what I just fucked up.

I was supposed to figure out a way to get me and Kai to stop hating each other. Looks like I accomplished the opposite.

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CHAPTER 10



KAI

eah? Then you'll know no matter how much you kiss his ass and try to be the perfect son, he'll never fucking love you. Why do you insist on trying to get his approval when you'll never get it?

The words Carter threw at me run a loop through my head as I pull on the rowing machine. I'm not stupid. I know Pop hates me, wishing he had a son that was straight and could give him heirs or whatever archaic views he has. But to have someone else see it? That fucking stings. Especially when that someone is Carter.

Seeing how worried Dominic was when he heard Carter was almost killed, then how freely he showed his love for him when he saw him with his own two eyes? That shit hurt. It shouldn't have—Pop has outwardly hated me since I was twelve. I've had over a decade to get used to it. But seeing that a man as ruthless as Dominic had the capacity to love his son made me *want*. I want what they have. And it hurts ever more when I know I won't ever have it.

I yank on the machine hard enough to almost hit myself in the face with the bar, but I don't care. I want to row until my fucking arms fall off. I need to get away from my thoughts, from my failures, from my shortcomings as a son.

Nico comes over, kneeling beside me with a look of understanding on his face. I only get like this when some bullshit goes on with Pop. It's doubly bad now because Carter is added to the mix. I didn't think my enemy would have the power to actually hurt me. "How long you gonna keep this up?"

I pant, pulling against the rowing machine with all my might. I want to tell him to fuck off, but that would require me breaking concentration to answer him.

"Wanna tell me what happened? If it's shit to do with your dad, you shouldn't beat yourself up. You know how he is. He'll die before he changes."

Of course, Nico understands. He's bi, and his dad had shit to say about it too. But Nico and his dad worked through their shit before he died. As one of the inner circle members for my dad, I figured Nico's father would rub off on Pop. That was a fucking pipe dream.

God, wanting my dad to say for once that he's proud of me is fucking pitiful. I'm a grown ass man, secure in my sexuality. I shouldn't want Pop to look past it to love me when I love myself.

Shaking my head to get sweat from my eyes, I pant, "Carter...too."

"The fuck did that asshole do?" he practically growls.

I stop rowing, chuckling at Nico's reaction. I really appreciate that he's the one person that has my back. Or is he? Carter was aiming a gun at my dad's head because he was taking up for me. Does he have my back too or was he trying to save face because we're married?

I glower at the ring on my finger, but don't take it off. For some reason, I like looking at it. I'm a fucking fool.

"He did nothing. Just told me the truth as he saw it."

"He's still an asshole." Nico hands me a towel. I drag it over my face, collecting the sweat as it drips down my forehead. "You want to talk about it?"

"That's the last thing I want to do," I say, standing from the machine and stretching my arms out. "I want to take a shower and lie down. This day has already been too much."

Not only am I thinking about the shit that went on at Indigo Arc, but a weird feeling settled in my chest when Dominic told me and Pop that Carter was almost killed. I shouldn't care. If he died, I'd be free of this marriage, and we'd still have the support of the Whitlock family since I would be widowed. But for some reason, the thought of Carter no longer in the world made me *feel*. I didn't release a full breath until he walked through the door of the conference room.

After wiping off my sweat from the machine, Nico and I head upstairs. It's close to ten at night, which means I've been in the gym for close to three hours. It's been a while since I've worked out that long, needing to get out of my own head. Now my arms feel like lead and some of the uneasy feeling that was settled in my chest starts to dissipate.

But I'm still feeling antsy. Being cooped up in this house—in Carter's house—makes me anxious.

I tell Nico I'm going to chill for the rest of the night, but I have no plans of being in this house longer than I have to.

After taking a quick shower, I get dressed in a fresh suit and slip out, leaving my cell phone behind so Nico can't track me.

It's probably not the smartest thing to do, slipping my bodyguard, especially with someone trying to take down my family. But if I had Nico tag along, he'd take me to places my family or people that are close to the St. Clair family frequent. I don't want to go to those places. I don't want to see anyone I know. For tonight, I want to be Kaison. Just Kaison, not Kai St. Clair, heir to the St. Clair family.

What would my life be like if I weren't born into mafia royalty? Would Pop have accepted that I was gay? Would my mom have stuck around? Would I have grown up like a normal fucking person? There's no way to answer any of those questions, so I forcefully push them out of my head.

I walk down the street and meet the taxi I ordered before I left the house. Once I'm settled in, I tell him to take me down to Shell Village, the city on the opposite side of the bridge. Right now, I want to find a club to sit in, letting the bass beats drown out my thoughts as I get drunk. I'll have the bartender call me a cab when I'm ready to go home. But not until I'm well and truly fucked up.

A long exhale leaves my lips as soon as we enter the city. My mind somewhat clears as I look around to find somewhere to drown my sorrows. As soon as I spot a club that looks lively, I have the taxi driver stop. Reaching for my wallet, I pay him his fare, along with a hundred dollars for a tip since he didn't try to make small talk.

At the door of the club, I slip the bouncer a hundred and he lets me through. I'm searched—though he doesn't find the blade at the small of my back—then allowed entrance into the club proper.

It's not even midnight, but the place is packed wall to wall. The patrons on the dance floor writhe against each other, their bodies pressed tightly together. I move as far away from the dance floor as I can. Don't want to run the risk of someone trying to drag me out to make a fool of myself. Besides, I came here to get shitfaced, not hook up.

Once at the bar, I take a seat on one of the free stools and order some top shelf tequila. If I'm gonna get fucked up, might as well do it with something that will get the job done quickly.

The bartender pours me a shot, but I stop him before he gets too far away. I tip the drink into my mouth, the burn of the tequila like liquid fire in my gut. I grimace but hold up the glass for another. He pours a second, then slides two more glasses on the bar and pours me shots three and four. I salute him with the fresh glass and tip it back as well.

Handing the bartender my card, I yell, "Start a tab," over the music. He nods and takes my card, hooking it to a clipboard behind the bar.

The burn of the tequila lingers behind my ribs, and I wait for it to dissipate before I take the next shot.

I still shouldn't be getting in my feelings because of shit Pop says. But him talking about my business always gets under my skin, especially because I know it's profitable. I've been over the books after my accountants and know I'm well into the black. St. Clair's Construction is worth over ten million dollars. I know it's not failing. But what is Pop's angle? Why does he always have to knock me down?

Shaking my head to clear it of Pop's bullshit, I take shot number three, then number four follows quickly behind it. The burn is still there, but it's lessened. I'm starting to get tipsy, but it's not fast enough. I wave the bartender back over. He nods and comes back over with the bottle. He lines up four more glasses and tops them all off. In rapid succession, I toss them all back, the burn now gone completely.

I turn the glasses over, stacking them on top of each other as my mind starts to go in different directions. Even with all the alcohol in my system, Carter's words continue to reverberate in my skull.

Yeah? Then you'll know no matter how much you kiss his ass and try to be the perfect son, he'll never fucking love you. Why do you insist on trying to get his approval when you'll never get it?

It shouldn't sting as much that he saw through Pop's bullshit. Anyone with eyes knows how he feels about me. But it doesn't make me feel any better. I don't have a mom. From what Pop told me, she dropped me off when I was barely a year old and never looked back. Like me, he's an only

child, so I have no aunts or uncles. No grandparents. It's just me and Pop. Even before I told him I liked other boys when I was barely a teen, we were never particularly close.

So why does his lack of affection make me feel like shit? Seeing what Carter has with Dominic must be what's getting to me.

Why does Carter pointing it out make me feel so alone? Even more so than I usually am. Nico has always been in my corner, but we grew up together. That's to be expected. Other than Nico, I have no one. I thought, after our explosive time in his office, that Carter would reconsider hating me, and I don't know, be someone else in my corner...

That's not to be. It's been weeks since we fucked, and he hasn't even tried to talk to me more than saying a few snarky sentences. It seems like for the rest of my life, or the rest of the time I'm married to Carter—whichever ends first—I'll be alone.

Thinking about Carter now leads me to think about how he took me over his desk. He was so commanding of my body, so in charge of my pleasure. He owned me like no one else ever has. But that was his point, wasn't it? He said he owned me after he shoved his cum back into me.

His dick tunneled into me like he had every right to be there, like my body belonged to him and only him.

Groaning, I put my head down on the bar, hoping a few knocks will dislodge the image of Carter, but that does nothing to stop him from overtaking my thoughts. His hard, tatted body. How fathomless his eyes are when they land on me. And his lips. Fuck, his mouth on mine made me *burn*. What would it be like if he took his time with me? If he let me touch and lick him all over? If I could study him while I rode his dick, watching every expression cross his face.

"Get out of my head," I mutter, banging my head against the bar a few more times. I'm supposed to be hating my husband, not lusting after him.

"Having a bad day?" a soft, feminine voice shouts in my ear. I'm slow to respond, since I'm starting to feel the tequila in a big way. When I lift my head, I see a white hand with long red nails, dragging over my forearm. "I'm a good listener."

I roll my eyes and hold up my left hand without making eye contact. "I'm married."

"Well, I don't see her anywhere around," the woman says. I look up at her, meeting dark brown eyes that are void of any emotion other than greed. I'm sure she's clocked the Vacheron Constantin watch I have on—one of my least expensive watches—and the Cartier cuff links and thought she'd find an easy mark.

I turn to her with a lazy grin. "He's at home. We like to give each other space to do our own thing sometimes."

Her smile stays in place, but I see the hope dim in her eyes. "Oh. Well, that's good for a healthy marriage. Excuse me." She moves away from the stool she perched on, then slinks up to some other poor slub. As soon as I said I was married to a man, she must have known she had no chance. The guy she chose eats up her attention, facing her fully with a wide smile on his face, like he just hit the jackpot. Good luck to him. Hope he knows she's going to bleed him dry.

After another round of tequila and a beer, I have to piss like a racehorse. Stumbling over my feet, I make my way to the restroom, which is blessedly empty. I go into a stall, not wanting to embarrass myself if I have to lean against the wall to take a piss.

I relieve myself, thankfully not making a mess with how heavy and sloppy my hands feel. I wash my hands and head back to the main floor to get the bartender to call me a cab. Now, I wish I hadn't left my phone at home so I could get in touch with Nico to pick me up. Or even Carter. Carter would give me shit about getting shitfaced, but he wouldn't be mad right? I don't want my husband to be mad at me.

A brief chuckle escapes my lips, causing a few people I pass to look at me like I've lost my mind. I have a fucking husband. One that I'm supposed to hate, but don't really. We don't talk, we argue when we do exchange words and we fucked one time, but I think I want more. I think I want to get to know him, to see if I'll really be unhappy with him or if I'm so used to not having anything that I resign myself to unhappiness.

An arm comes around my waist and steers me towards a back door. I look up at the person touching me, expecting to see one of my men or a Whitlock guy, but I don't recognize the person whose arm is wrapped around me. "Come on. We'll help you get home."

"Who the fuck are you?" I slur when someone else guides me to the door. I bring the second man into focus, but don't recognize him either. "Geoff me."

I push at them both and throw my arms out wildly, but I may as well be hitting them with feathers for all the good it's doing. They manage to

muscle me outside into a back alley, where another man is waiting, leaning against the green dumpster.

In my inebriated state, I stagger as far away from them as possible, to make sure I have them all in my sights.

Two have blond hair like me, but with brown eyes and the one that was waiting outside is black haired. As much as I can, I catalog their features, knowing if they don't kill me, I'll fucking come after them.

I'm drunk off my ass, but I try to clear my head enough so I can memorize as much as I can about them. One of the blond men is taller and slimmer than the others, with a tattoo of words on his neck that says Lover Boy. *Lover Boy?* The fuck kind of shit is that? Carter has tattoos all up and down his body, but he'd never tat some dumb shit like that on himself.

The other blond man has a scar above his eyebrow that trails down the side of his face and pockmarked skin. Mr. Black Hair is classically handsome with a square jaw and the bluest eyes I've ever seen in my life. If I wasn't practically obsessed with my husband and his deep aquamarine eyes, I'd try to shoot my shot at my possible attacker, even now knowing they don't mean me any good.

The blond with the shitty tattoo steps closer to me. "Give up your wallet and we'll let you keep your life."

Chuckling, I worm my way out of my jacket, tossing it to the ground so I can get to my knife faster. "Do you know who the fuck I am?" I slur, the words almost blending together.

"Don't fucking care who you are," black hair says, bending down to pick up a discarded bottle. He cracks it over top of the dumpster, the jagged ends flashing in the pale moonlight. "The wallet. Hand it over."

"I ain't givin you shit." It's not smart. I could toss them my wallet and try to get away, but that's not me, drunk or sober.

My head is fuzzy, and my fingers don't want to work, but I try to reach for my knife. My hand grabs at nothing, so I take my eyes off the men for a split second. That's all it takes for them to be on me, fists and kicks aimed at me.

I fall to the ground, my head hitting the asphalt behind me with a thud. Over and over, kicks are aimed at my face, my gut, my back. Anywhere they can reach. I feel none of it because of the alcohol coursing through my veins, but I do feel myself slipping. Before I sink into unconsciousness, I want to give them something to remember me by.

Rolling onto my side, I make it seem like I've given up. That stops the ass whooping and someone bends to take my wallet from my pocket. Gripping the handle of my blade that I finally found, I bring it up in an arch, slicing through flesh. Blood sprays on my face as whoever took my wallet cries out.

"Fucking son of a bitch." Mr. Black Hair. I open my eyes and see blood leaking from his cheek.

"Messed up your pretty face," I mutter with a grin.

He snarls and grabs me by the collar of my shirt. With an angry shout, he slams my head on the ground three times.

Gasping, I try to hold on to consciousness, but it's a losing battle. My vision fuzzes out, the last thing I see is their backs as they run off down the alley, leaving me here to die.

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CHAPTER 11



CARTER

Istening to people cry ranks about as high on my list of shit I can't stand doing as getting a root canal. But I have to honor the men that gave their lives in service to my family, so I listen to their wives or girlfriends or mistresses wail and holler about justice. Of course there will be blood. I won't let what happened go unavenged.

Dad and I promise to pay for the services of everyone that was killed before we wire them each a million dollars. We also told them if they ever needed anything in the future, not to hesitate to ask. Their men died for us; we'd always take care of them.

The whole time I was talking to the families, however, my mind kept flashing back to Kai and the pain that was evident in his eyes before he stalked away from me. It was an expression I never thought I'd see on his face and one I didn't think I'd care about if I did. But it's really fucking with me that my words caused that look in his eyes.

I'm a fucking fool for thinking about *more* with Kai. And that more means not fucking hurting him.

I guess when I finger fucked my cum into him and told him I owned him, I meant that shit. Too bad my brain didn't catch up to that memo before I shot my mouth off about the shit I observed between him and Charlie. Now I have to fucking apologize. I don't apologize. It's not something I do, because I'm never fucking wrong. But the pang I keep getting in my chest as I think about the hurt expression on Kai's face, the one he couldn't hide, I know that this time, I was dead fucking wrong.

Dad comes to the house with me so we can go over what happened with our delivery and the fuckers that blew up our money and men. My house is closer, and I want to get out of this fucking suit.

After I get changed into a pair of jeans, a loose t-shirt and stuff my feet into combat boots, I trek down to Kai's room. Now that I think about it, I haven't been to his room since he moved in and I showed him where he'd be sleeping. Kai also hasn't been to my room. We've been moving around each other, less like roommates and more like strangers.

Well, strangers that fucked once.

My cock twitches as I think about Kai's ass around my dick. Fuck, he was tight, hot, and fucking slick for me. I wonder why he was so wet, why his ass was prepped and ready for me to slide in. Was he fucking himself on his fingers? On a dildo?

I have to stop in the hallway before I get to his room to arrange my cock in my pants. Thinking about Kai's plump ass swallowing a dildo as he fucks himself on it has my dick so hard, I can't walk straight.

It takes a few seconds to get my dick to stay put against my left leg, but I get it in place so I can talk to Kai. Hopefully, I won't try to fuck him when I see him. But when those gray eyes land on me, I sometimes think with my cock, not my actual brain.

Blowing out a long breath to prepare for Kai's taunting when I apologize, I knock on his door. I stand outside like a fucking asshole, waiting for my husband to deem it necessary to allow me inside his room. I should just fucking barge in.

Annoyed, I rap my knuckles harder on the door. "Kai, open up. It's Carter. Listen, we need to talk."

Nothing on the other side of the door. No noise, no shuffling to get to the door, no chuckling that I came to him. Again, I pound on the door. "Kai, open up. Now."

"Yeah, because that will get his attention." I turn hard eyes on Nico, his stupid fucking bodyguard that annoys the shit out of me. "Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you."

"Don't give a fuck." I push into Kai's room, intent on cursing him out for making me stand in the hallway like a son of a bitch. "Kai, get out here."

I check his bathroom and find it empty, though the shower looks recently use. Confused, I walk back out, pushing past Nico and going to Kai's closet. Not there either. I shoot him a look and head out of the room. Kai loves my gym, maybe he's working out.

Even before I get down to the basement, I know he isn't there. There are no sounds of machines churning or heavy breathing or gloves hitting the heavy bag. Even still, I check the gym and the showers down there. Nothing. Kai is nowhere to be found.

When I get back to the main landing, Nico is standing there, a look on his face like he fucked up. "What is it?" I growl, stepping closer to him.

He holds up Kai's phone. "I found this in his room."

Letting out a frustrated noise, I tell him, "Search the fucking house." Snapping my hand out, I curl it in his shirt and pull him close. "You were supposed to be watching him. That's your only fucking job!"

Nico snatches out of my hold. "This is the first time he's lied to me about staying in. So don't give me shit about trusting *my friend*."

I grunt and jog back up to my room. I grab my keys and wallet, intent on driving around the city to look for him. That'll be a bitch and a half, but Kai can't be out in the world unprotected. Not only because he's a St. Clair but because he's a St. Clair-*Whitlock*. Someone wants both of us dead. Someone wants our families dead.

When I step into the hallway, Dad blocks my path. I try to step around him, but he moves in front of me. "Dad, I gotta find Kai."

"I know where he is." He shoves his phone in my face and shows me some GPS coordinates. "When I made your rings, I figured you'd need to know where the other was. So, I put a GPS tracking device inside them."

"And you're just now telling me?" I asked pointedly and snatch the phone from his hand.

"I was gonna tell ya eventually. When the time was right."

"Thanks, Dad," I say sarcastically as I punch the coordinates into the phone. Frowning, I look up at Dad. "He's in Shell Village. At a night club."

"Good. Go get him. We don't know who could be out there trying to hurt him to get to you, me, and Charlie."

I nod and dart around him. When I get back downstairs, I motion for Nico who just stepped out of the sitting room. "Let's go. I know where he is."

We waste no time hopping into my car and I speed out of the driveway. Before I exit out of the gate to our home, I call Declan. "Meet me at Club Aurora."

"You got it," he replies, then hangs up.

About ten minutes into my insane speed towards Kai, Nico clears his throat. I glance at him briefly, then face the road. "I'm sorry," he says begrudgingly. "This really has never happened. I guess with his dad's bullshit, then your bullshit, he needed out."

"And he couldn't take you?" His apology means fuck all to me. The only thing I care about is finding Kai and making sure he's not hurt. I will fucking kill anyone that touches him.

"You like him, don't you?" Nico asks, side stepping my question.

"What? No."

"Yeah, you do. Or you would have sent me to get him. I am his *bodyguard*, remember?" I make noise between a grunt and scoff. "Don't fuck him over, Carter or I swear to fucking god—"

"You'll do what? Kill me?"

"Yeah, I will. There's nothing I won't do for Kaison. If you're going to be there for him, fucking be there. Don't just screw him over or fuck with his head. Or I will slit your throat while you sleep."

We say no more after that. I know Nico believes what he says, though he'd never get the chance to act on it. I don't intend to do anything to Kai. I don't know what I want, my head is so fucked up, but I don't intend to hurt him. I did that today and it still makes me feel like shit. I can't remember the last time something I did or said affected me so much.

Around twenty minutes later, we pull up to the nightclub. People are leaving for the night, but I don't see Kai among them. Did he already leave? I look down at the app I downloaded that corresponds to our GPS coordinates, but it hasn't moved. Kai hasn't moved. What if...

"The alley!" I shout, hopping out of my car that's stopped in the middle of the road. Pounding footsteps behind me has me turning around, meeting the eyes of my little brother.

"What is it?" he asks but doesn't slow down.

"Kai," is all I say.

Once we get to the alley, I see Kai's shoes from behind the dumpster. "What the fuck?" I roar, putting on a burst of speed to get to him.

Rounding the dumpster, I see Kai struggling to sit up, his knife held out in front of him. "Go...the fuck..."

"Kaison, it's me. Carter. I'm not going to hurt you. What happened?"

Declan brushes past me, taking the knife from Kai's fumbling hands. "We gotta get inside, we're too exposed out here."

"Help me with him."

We both step beside Kai and drag him to his feet. He looks over at me, his hair loose and in his face. "Husband, is that you?"

Despite the situation, I chuckle. "It's me." My laughter dies on my tongue when I spot the blood trail down his back. Raising my hand, I touch it and feel it's still warm. "Fuck, you're bleeding. What happened?"

"Got my wallet."

"We'll cancel your cards tomorrow. Where are you hurt?"

"Head," is all he says before his legs give out under him and he faints.

"God fucking dammit!" I shout. I push Declan off Kai and sling him over my shoulder. "Get the car door."

Nico had just pulled into the head of the alley haphazardly. Declan rushes around me and opens the door. Awkwardly, I stuff me and Kai into the back of the car, sliding over and dragging him with me until his head is resting in my lap.

"Go," Declan says. "I'll meet you at Lakewood Medical Center."

The hospital he named is about five miles away. Nico stomps his foot on the gas to reverse the car, then throws it into drive without braking. He weaves around cars, honking his horn for them to move the fuck out of the way.

Kai's eyes flutter open, and he stares up at me as if he can't believe it. "You're really here?" He reaches up and touches my face, his hand covered in blood. I'm not sure if it's his or not. "I thought I was seeing shit."

"No, you asshole. We'll have words about you taking off the way you did as soon as the doc patches you up."

Kai nods and nuzzles closer to me. A funny feeling settles into my gut as I look down at him. I don't know whether to touch him or not, so I keep my hands to myself.

Nico pulls us up to the emergency room entrance and hustles to the back. He helps me drag Kai out. Luckily, he's awake, so he can help us a little when we move him.

Once inside, I shout for someone to help and a few nurses run over, asking questions, and fussing over Kai. I hand him over and start to follow. One nurse grabs my arm, earning a hard shove from me for touching me out

of turn. "Do not fucking touch me." The man gets to his feet and holds his hands up, walking away with a quick glance over his shoulder.

"Sir," a smaller nurse says, giving me a hard look. "Don't abuse the staff here. If you want us to look at your friend—"

"He's my fucking husband and you will check him out." I let the threat go unsaid, but she gets the implications.

"Right away, sir," she says, turning to Kai as the other nurses get him settled into a bed.

They work on getting Kai hooked up to a blood pressure machine and an IV, then they check the back of his head.

A doctor steps into the room, introduces herself and takes over for the nurses checking Kai over. She snaps on a pair of gloves and pushes his hair out of the way and hums. "Looks like he'll need a few stitches. Clippers."

I grin at the look on Kai's face when the doctor says that, but he's still too fucked up to stop it. I'm not sure if it's because he's drunk or has a concussion, but either way, his hands can't push them away as the doctor makes quick work of shaving a small patch of his hair. The rest of his tresses will cover his bald spot.

It doesn't take the doctor long to throw three stitches into the wound on the back of his head. When she's done, she looks at Kai. "I want to get some images to make sure you don't have any fractures, in your skull or otherwise. You're beat up pretty bad. Then we'll keep you overnight for observation."

"No," Kai says, touching the back of his head gingerly. "Home. Wanna go home."

She sighs as if she expected his refusal to stay. Her serious eyes turn to me. "You're his husband?" I nod. "I can't make him stay. He seems to only have a concussion and some bumps and bruises, but I want to make sure. After we take some images, I'll have the discharge papers drawn up."

"Okay," I say with a sigh. I know no matter what I say, Kai won't stay in the hospital if he doesn't have to. No need to start a fight here for the world to see. I'd win and it would be shitty to beat a guy's ass that already has stitches in the back of his head.

Three hours and a bag of IV fluids later, Kai is given a semi-clean bill of health. He doesn't have any broken bones or a skull fracture, but he does have bruised ribs and a concussion. The doctor gave me instructions, telling

me he could rest, but I had to wake him up every few hours to make sure he's alert and aware.

"If at any point he becomes disoriented and he doesn't know who you are or can't answer basic questions, you get him to the nearest emergency room."

By now, both Declan and Nico are inside waiting with me. No one speaks while we wait for Kai to sober up and for him to get his test results back. He dozes off every now and then, waking up with a start. Every time he does, he winces and touches the back of his head.

Nico grumbles the last time he wakes suddenly. "You're gonna hurt yourself with that shit."

Dazed gray eyes meet mine, then slide over to Nico. "S all good. Get me out of here."

I push past Nico and wrap my arm around Kai's waist to help him off the bed. I don't know why I'm suddenly so territorial over him, but I don't want anyone to touch him. Not while he's hurt and vulnerable.

Guilt assails me when it never has before. If I hadn't said what I did, he wouldn't have ducked Nico and gone to that club alone. He wouldn't have gotten hurt. This is all on me.

Declan climbs in the passenger seat while Nico drives. I sit in the back with Kai. Over his shoulder, Declan says, "If someone steals my car, I'm going to lose my shit."

I grunt. "Call someone to pick it up."

"Probably towed by now," Nico adds unhelpfully.

Declan glares at his profile. "If you'd do your fucking job next time, this—"

"Save it, kid. Your brother already gave me a lecture and it just sounds petulant coming from you."

Kai barks a laugh, then nuzzles closer to me. My heart flutters in my chest at his small movement. "Leave him alone, Nico. I'd rather Declan not shoot you while you're driving."

"He could try," Nico says with humor, like Declan isn't glaring at him.

After their small spat, we're quiet for the rest of the ride home.

It's a bitch to get Kai out of the car, especially since he fell asleep again. When I wake him, he comes up swinging, getting a good shot into my jaw. Realizing it's me, he gives me a lopsided grin. "I guess that's payback for your bullshit earlier."

"Fuck you, Kai," I say, but the curse doesn't hold the usual heat.

I drag him upstairs, but when we get to my bedroom, I turn the knob and usher him inside. Nico slowly follows me in and when I get Kai in bed, I catch his curious expression. I don't say shit, just take Kai's shoes off and begin to remove his clothing, starting with his pants.

Before I can pull them down, I look over my shoulder at Nico and Declan. "Unless you want to look at my husband's dick, I suggest you both get out."

"You could let him die," Declan says nonchalantly. "Blame it on the head injury. Then you wouldn't have to worry about having a husband."

With steel in his tone, Nico says, "If you say some shit like that again, I will fucking end you."

Before Declan can reply, I hold my hand up, exhaustion creeping in my veins. "E-fucking-nough. Both of you. Get the fuck out of my room."

I continue to take Kai's pants off as I hear the door click shut behind me. I unbutton his shirt and pull it from his shoulders, then pull off his socks. With a deep breath, I drag his underwear off. It takes effort, but I don't stare at his dick. For long.

After he's naked, I go to the bathroom and grab two cloths. I wet them both but only add soap to one.

Kai's eyes flutter open as his steely gaze lands on me. "Don't try anything dirty. I'm too hurt to enjoy it."

I scoff a laugh and sit beside him. "That won't happen. You smell like booze, vomit and garbage. Nothing makes my dick soft faster than that combination."

Kai chuckles, then winces. "Thank you, Carter. For coming for me." His eyes take on a more lucid quality. "How did you find me?"

I tap his ring. "My dad added a GPS tracker in them. Came in handy tonight."

He breathes a laugh, then relaxes further into the mattress.

Washing him up doesn't take long. By the time I make a third trip from the bathroom, he no longer smells like a fucking trash can. He smells like me. Fuck if that doesn't make my dick twitch.

Kai is already asleep by the time I'm finished, so I get him dressed in my clothes and curl up beside him. The doctor said to wake him every few hours, so I set my alarm for three hours from now. Before I climb into bed, I take a quick shower, getting the smell of antiseptic off me.

I step into my room and just stare at Kai lying in the middle of my bed. Even with all his muscles, he looks so small. So helpless. He also looks like he belongs in my bed.

Sticking my dick in Kai was a terrible fucking idea. Before, I hated him. I wouldn't have cared if he was skinned alive and I probably would have celebrated his injuries. Now, all I can think about is how to fully make him mine. How I can make him my husband in more than name.

Now, I wanted to fucking own him.

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CHAPTER 12



CARTER

ired curses fly from my lips when the sun streams through my bedroom window. I should have gotten those black out curtains like I've been telling myself for years. Large windows are great for looking at the night sky when I need to think, but it's shit when I'm as exhausted as I am, and the sun wakes me by stabbing its rays into my eyes.

As the doctor told me, I've been waking Kai up every few hours to make sure he knows who I am, who he is and what year it is. He grumbled every time I woke him, but I didn't give a fuck. We stayed up for about an hour where I asked him random shit about his life and the world before I let him go back to sleep. Even though he wasn't getting much sleep, he still woke up repeatedly, swinging into the air. Every time, he'd hit me and startle me awake. The last time he woke so violently, I grabbed his arms, holding him in a bear hug. He settled down immediately, sinking back into sleep. Since that seemed to work, I kept a hold of him and drifted back off. He didn't wake up anymore throughout the night.

But I'm still fucking tired. Playing nursemaid fucking sucks.

I slap my hand on my phone when the alarm goes off, cursing and grumbling that I'm up only two hours after closing my eyes. They feel like sandpaper as I peel them open. A full night's sleep would be great. I have to work, but I'll bring my laptop to bed so I can watch over Kai while he's resting.

Yawning widely, I throw my legs over the side of my bed and stretch my arms above my head. Then I turn to Kai, who's dead to the world, one

arm thrown over his chest and the other by his side.

I study him in his slumber. I've always thought Kai was handsome, though I never wanted to admit it. Even with the bruises on his face and his split lip, he's still good looking. A fire stokes in my belly; seeing those injuries on him making me irrationally angry. If anyone puts bruises on him, it'll be me, not some jerk off that wanted his wallet.

Another yawn tears from my throat as I lean over and shake Kai. "Wake up, Kai. You know the drill."

Kai doesn't move. I stare at him, waiting for him to open his eyes, but nothing happens.

"Kai." I shake him again, this time a little harder. "Wake up." He still doesn't stir. "Don't fuck around, Kaison. I'm not in the mood."

I turn fully to look at him, thinking he's gonna stop fucking with me, but he doesn't. He just lies there, looking pale, his lips a thin slash across his face.

Grabbing his face, I turn him to me and his eyes don't so much as flutter.

I raise my hand to slap him, but that would probably make his concussion worse. "Kai. Wake up. Wake up now!" I shake him again, but he doesn't respond.

Not knowing what else to do, I bend down and kiss him. Well, not really kiss. More like a hard press of my lips to his to get him to respond to me.

My heart hammers against my chest when nothing happens. What the fuck? Did he slip into a coma in the night? I just talked to him. How could something change so fast? What if—

A hand tangles in my hair and Kai opens his mouth, stroking his tongue against my lips. I sigh in relief, giving Kai the opportunity to thrust his tongue inside. I'm so relieved that I return the kiss, allowing him to hold my head to keep me in place.

Then I snap out of it and pull away. Kai whimpers, tightening his hand in my hair, trying to get at my mouth.

I pry his hand from my hair and sit back. "None of that. You got me out of your system, remember?" It's childish to throw that in his face, but I don't know what to think right now. The relief that flooded me when he kissed me back is so uncharacteristic that I don't know how to respond.

Kai's face turns to stone, and he nods gingerly. "Move. I gotta pee." He shoves against me, practically pushing me off the bed.

I move back to allow him some space to get up. But once he takes a step, his knees buckle under him. Quickly, I stand and grab him around the waist and throw his arm around my shoulder. He tries to push me off and I slap him hard on the ass, making him yelp. "Don't be proud," I threaten. "Let me fucking help you."

"I really fucking hate you," he mutters.

"Liar."

When we're standing in front of the toilet, I shuffle around to lift the lid and stand beside him. Kai sways as he reaches into his pants to pull out his cock. Then his knees buckle again, and he starts to go down.

"Jesus, Kai," I exclaim, catching him before he hits the ground. "Here, lock your knees." I stand him up and he does what I say. He won't be able to do this for long or he'll pass out, so hopefully he finishes his piss soon.

Kai releases a shaky breath and fumbles with his pants. I probably shouldn't have tied them up, but they were a little loose on his hips. I didn't want them to slip down in the night.

Sounding like he hates to admit it, Kai sighs and says, "I can't get the string undone. I need help."

He doesn't like being helpless. Since he has my head all fucked up from his kiss and how grateful I felt when he woke up, I decide to fuck with him. "You want me to help with the string or hold your dick while you piss too?"

"Both," he taunts, looking at me over his shoulder. He's fucking with me too.

I lock an arm around his chest to hold him in place and I reach around and undo the drawstring of his pants with a quick tug. I reach inside his underwear and pull out his soft shaft. Kai's back goes ramrod straight, as if he didn't expect me to actually grab his cock.

"If you're gonna go," I whisper into the skin of his neck, "you better do it soon." To further fuck with him, I stroke his dick once.

"Fucking stop," Kai says in a whisper right before he starts to urinate.

When he's done, I shake his dick and grab a piece of toilet paper to wipe his cockhead. Then I reach around him and flush the toilet.

"Feel better?" I ask, stroking him once more for good measure.

Growling, Kai wraps his hand over mine, using me to stroke him off. "If you're going to jerk me off, don't fuck around. Do it right."

It's my turn to stiffen. I'm not supposed to have Kai like this again. He told me just once. Just one time to get me out of his system and that's it. But

I did start this game, so I'll fucking finish it.

I drag my hand from his chest to his throat, clamping down just as I stroke him from base to tip.

Kai leans his head back against my shoulder, moaning lightly. He thrusts his hips forward and grips my thigh with his free hand. "Jesus. Carter." His lips part, loud, panting breaths filling the air. I feel his cock grow in my hand, precum leaking from his tip.

I dip my head, nuzzling against his shoulder. "Look at you," I murmur, darting my tongue out so I can taste his skin. "You're a fucking slut for it, aren't you?" I tip his head back so I can really look at him. His steel gray eyes bore into me, lust brimming in their depths as he groans with each tug of his cock.

I swipe my index finger over his lower lip, needing to feel the plump flesh. Kai's eyes flutter as he fucks the circle of my fist.

"Look at me," I growl, lowering my hand back to his throat and squeezing. Kai's eyes snap open, boring into me with barely contained ecstasy. "You're fucking perfect, baby. So fucking perfect." Kai whimpers, staring at me as if he's hanging on to my every word. "So good for me, you know that? Look how fucking good you're doing for me." Kai moans, pushing faster into my hand. "You want to come? Want to blow your load?"

"Yes," he whispers around another groan that tears from his chest when I squeeze his cockhead. "Please."

"Love when you beg," I say before I close my lips around his, moving my hand faster on his dick. I dip my tongue into his mouth, tasting him. Kai moans into the kiss and I swallow the noise. Then I jerk him faster still so I can taste more of his sweet sounds.

Something inside me always reacts to Kai's closeness. I can't help the praise that bursts forth when I touch him. Kai may not realize it, but he gives me control easily. He might hate it when he's in his right mind, but when I have him like this, he lets me do with his body as I please.

Kai breaks the kiss and gasps, staring at me with lust drunk eyes. "Carter," he whimpers, his body shuddering.

"Come for me, Kaison," I whisper against his lips, nipping at him before I dip my tongue inside for another taste. "Be good for me and come."

A strangled sound leaves his lips, and Kai floods my hand with his cum. I continue to jerk him, pulling every wave of release from him. His legs

start to buckle again, but I hold him up, milking him for all he has.

"Too much," he murmurs, using the hand around mine to stop me from tugging on him again. "Fuck, that's too much."

I laugh against his neck, kissing him there once more. "I bet it is. Come on, let me clean you up."

Making sure I have a grip on him, I reach other and pull down some toilet paper and clean my hand, then his dick. I'll clean the toilet later. When my hand is clean, I walk Kai over to the counter, lean him against it and grab a cloth. I make quick work of cleaning his cock, watching how his half-lidded eyes track my movements.

"How's your head?" I ask. The doctor didn't say anything about sexual activity, but I'm sure the force of his release probably didn't help.

He scoffs. "Don't pretend like you care about me," he says in a low voice.

I stop what I'm doing and look at him. "Why would you say that?"

"You know why." That same look of hurt reflects in his eyes as it did when he was at the casino. His guard is down, so he's showing me everything. He's showing me all of him.

Fuck, I didn't want to have this conversation right now, especially when he's injured, but it's doing things to me that he looks at me like this.

Sighing, I put the cloth on the counter and pull Kai's pants up. I can't talk to him while his dick is out. "I figured out you were missing because I couldn't find you when I came to apologize. I fucked up." I meet his gaze, wanting him to know I mean what I say. "I shouldn't have said what I said. It's not my business. But," I push my hand through my hair. "But Charlie is a fucking dick, and I didn't like how he talked about you and your company."

Kai pulls his lips in and nods slowly. "I know what my father is. And you were right. I've been seeking his approval for longer than I can remember. It's a lost cause, since I won't pretend to be a straight man and get married to a woman and have three kids and a fucking mini poodle. But it's so deeply ingrained that I almost can't help it."

I hide my surprise at his admission. Kai is like me in that regard, holding on to emotions and not letting anyone see.

But I do see him. Right now, all I see is the little boy that didn't feel loved by his dad. I can't fathom that. All I've felt from Dad was affection, respect and maybe a little exasperation, but definitely love. Growing up in

this life, people say love will get you killed. Dad found a way to make sure we felt loved and also prepared for the world we grew up in.

Slowly, I put my hands on his cheeks. Kai lets out a long breath, closing his eyes at my touch. "I told Charlie he no longer gets to talk to you or ask about your company. I told him he doesn't get to have access to you. You know why?"

He opens his eyes and shakes his head. "Why?"

"Because you're mine, Kaison. I told you when I fucked you over my desk that I own you."

A sardonic smile crosses his face. "I thought that was just about the sex."

I chuckle and press my forehead to his. "Me too. But you got under my skin, Kaison St. Clair-Whitlock." I pull back and look him in the eye. "Now tell me, how are you feeling?"

"Need to brush my teeth."

Turning him around, I hold him up while he brushes his teeth with the toothbrush I set out for him. When he rinses his mouth, I wipe his mouth with a clean cloth. "Better?"

"Can I go lie down? My head really hurts."

"Hold on," I tell him, not wanting to surprise him. He nods and I scoop him up, holding him close to my chest as I walk him back to bed. Fucker is heavier than he looks, but I manage to get him to bed without much effort. He sighs when I set him on the bed and adjust his pillows.

"Come lie down with me. You're warm."

Chuckling, I do what he asks. "You're needy."

He pauses for a second. "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"That I'm yours. That you own me."

I sit up and look down at him. "I never lie about my possessions." Kai rolls his eyes, but a smile plays at his lips. "What do you want, Kai? Do you want to see how shit goes if we actually try to stop hating each other?"

He bites his lip, looking away for a moment. "I want to. But..." He looks at me, that vulnerability shining through again. "I've never...had a relationship. I don't know what I'm doing."

I shrug. "Neither do I. We can keep doing what we're doing, fighting and fucking and that could be our relationship. It's whatever we want to do. If you just want to fuck, that's cool too. But I think our lives would be

easier if we work together." I don't tell him how fucked up I was knowing I hurt him. I still can't explain why I felt that way about someone I've hated for most of my life. Everything about this entire situation is doing my head in, but what am I going to do about it? I'm stuck with Kai until one of us dies. My life would be much easier when I go out in the world every day if I didn't have to hate Kai as well as worry about him catching a bullet.

"I guess we can play it by ear. I still don't like you that much. Not really."

Laughing in a hard burst, I lie down beside him, looking at the ceiling. "Well, I like you Kaison. It's tripping me the fuck out, but I'll admit it."

He looks over at me, so I do the same. "You went to my company. Looked through my books. Why?"

I shrug. "I'm an accountant. I wanted to know what the fuck Charlie was talking about, then I planned to help you get your business back in the black. But you're way in the black."

"Yeah, I could have told you that. Pop has been angling for my company for the past two years. Initially, I was going to sign it over, hoping he could pull me out of debt, but my accountants showed me my projected growth over five years. So, I held on."

I turn over to my side so I can really look at him. "I wanted to talk to you about something else too."

"What?"

"Someone is stealing from you."

"What?" he repeats, this time with anger coloring his tone. He sits up quickly, then winces as he brings a hand to the back of his head. He lies back down, tucking his knees close to his chest as he breathes through the pain.

Sitting up, I reach out to touch him, then pull my hand back. God, why am I so fucking terrible at this? I've fucked him and jerked his dick—I should be able to touch him. "Relax. I shouldn't have told you until you got better, but I wanted you to know."

After a few more minutes, he raises his tired eyes to mine. "How do you know?"

I tell him about the discrepancies I found in his monthly income reports, as well as exactly how much was missing when I did the calculations. "With how much business you're doing," I say, lying back on the bed when

he pulls himself out of the ball he was in, "I knew you should have at least fifty grand more than you had."

"There are three accountants that work for me. One or more are stealing from me when I pay them well for their loyalty. When I get out of this fucking bed, I'll take whoever is stealing from me to The fucking Fox Club."

"What's that?" I know the lounge that his family owns is called The Fox Club, but I can't imagine why he'd want to have a drink with someone that's stealing from him.

He closes his eyes and sighs tiredly. "It's where we take anyone that fucks with us. The Fox Club has a soundproofed basement equipped with a drain in the middle of the floor. Easy clean up."

A smile spreads across my face. "Interesting. Maybe we should get one."

He cracks an eye open and looks at me. "We're married now. You can use that room." He pauses. "Want to come with me while I take care of my traitor?"

"Fuck yeah, I do." I know I sound eager as fuck, but I've heard about how brutal Kai is when it comes to his victims. I'd love to see him in action. "What do you do? Torture?"

He nods. "I like knives. Slicing someone...that gets my blood singing in my veins."

"I want to watch. I don't usually slice people."

"What do you do?"

Another smile lights up my face as I think about my past kills that I could take my time with. "Different things. Mainly torture them to death. I like to hear their screams."

Kai chuckles sleepily. "Maybe this will work out after all."

We're silent a few beats, my mind racing a mile a minute. It almost feels...normal talking to him. Like talking to Gavin, except with real feelings somewhere in there. Kai is still a pain in my ass—he'll probably continue to be a pain in my ass for a while yet—but this conversation with him is easy. It'll take a minute for me to have effortless discussions with him without consciously telling myself to not lose my shit on him, but I can work at it.

From the way he's speaking freely with me, it's like he doesn't have many people to talk to. I have Gavin, Dad, Declan, and a few other guys I

grew up with. Who does Kai have? Nico? I never see him with any of the guys he used to hang out with when we were kids. Maybe he's eager to have someone else.

"Kai?" he hums, adjusting himself more comfortably against my side, though we're not cuddling. "Why were you at The Devil's Den?"

He tenses beside me, but lets his body relax almost immediately. "I like to let off some steam sometimes when I don't have a hookup lined up." It's my turn to tense.

It's stupid and I know it, to be irritated that he's a member of The Devil's Den. Especially because I am too. But I don't like the thought of him being there, playing with someone else.

"You're gay?" Kai asks and pulls my mind from my heart thundering at his mention of a hookup. There's no reason for me to be jealous of someone I don't know.

"Bi," I say. "Only a few people know."

"Glad to be in on the secret," Kai says dryly. I scoff.

"What about you?" he asks tiredly. "Why were you there? You got a secret kinky side I don't know about?"

Chuckling, I glance over at him from the corner of my eye. "Maybe."

"What's your kink?"

Rolling over, I look at him, studying his features. His straight nose, downturned mouth, and high cheeks. "Bondage. Sensory play. Impact play. Yours?"

"Exhibitionism." His lips lift in a smirk. "Though that's probably out now, you cave man. *I own you. You belong to me.*" I'm sure the high-pitched voice he used is supposed to be me, though I sound nothing like that. I laugh softly, not wanting to startle him so he hurts his head. "It's nice to have an audience."

I store that information away for later. Don't know when I'll need it.

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CHAPTER 13



KAI

y body is a furnace when I wake up, sweat coating my chest and forehead. But I don't move. I've grown used to having Carter wrapped around me when I wake up. He told me I thrashed around a lot in the hospital and when I got back home, but I don't remember. He said the only way to keep me calm through the night was if he held on to me. I'm not sure how true that is, but I find I don't mind.

It's been a week since I got jumped by those fucking cowards and had my wallet stolen, but I'm feeling almost at one hundred percent. I get headaches and dizziness when I stand too fast or do too much, but I'm on the mend.

My fucking husband won't allow me to do much of anything by myself. He's taken saying he owns me to heart. He's bathed me, walked me to the bathroom, helped me downstairs for dinner that he cooked—he's a terrible fucking cook and I let him know it so often he gets takeout—and changed my clothes. He's been waiting on me hand and foot—though not without grumbling. If he seemed too happy about helping me, I'd think he was body snatched or something.

"Move," I mutter, pushing against his arm, even though I liked how the warm weight felt around me.

I'm trying to get used to wanting more from Carter. Or at least admitting it. I've kept to myself for so long that letting someone in is hard. Especially because it's Carter. He's been on my shit list for so long, I can't pinpoint exactly when our hatred for each other started.

But maybe he's the person I need. He understands me, since he's in the business too, the heir to a mafia family. I won't have to explain the life to him. Won't have to explain the danger or feel responsible for him in a way I would a civilian. Maybe I should try a bit harder. It'll be difficult, *since it's Carter*, but I want to try.

He releases a sleepy chuckle and rolls off me, looking up at the ceiling. "Good morning to you too." He glances over at me. "How do you feel?"

I curl my lip to give him a snarky answer, but I tell myself to chill out. I'm supposed to be *trying*. "Better." I touch the back of my head where the stitches are. There's no pain there. "I think the stitches can come out today."

"Let me see." I turn over so Carter can look at where my head looks like I'm part Frankenstein. The soft brush of his fingers over my scalp makes me shiver. "Looks good. You want to go to the hospital and have them do it or for me to call our doc?"

"Call the doc." I roll back over and glance at him. I study his expression—his clear, but still sleepy eyes, the plumpness of his mouth from just waking up and his dipped eyebrows from the sun beating down on him. He doesn't look like he thinks me lying in his bed or him checking out my injury is weird. Even though everything about this situation is weird.

"Why are you being nice to me?" I blurt out.

It's such a childish question, but I'm not sure how else to ask it. Carter was probably more into our beef than I was, seeking me out to start shit most times. But he's rolling with not being so openly hostile, like it's nothing. Like it's *easy*.

He shrugs. "I saw you beat to shit last week. I didn't like it. I take care of what I claim. That means your body and your feelings." I scoff and turn away, but Carter turns my face back to him. "You don't gotta believe me. You'll see. Let's get our day started. There's something I need to show you."

Sighing hard, I sit up and wait for the dizziness. When it doesn't come, I stand and stretch, feeling so much better. My ribs are still sore and my bruises still healing, but it's not as bad as it was. I feel like I can get back to work.

Over the past week while I've been recovering, Nico has been taking care of my business and anything else I needed doing. He's invaluable as my right-hand man. I'm sure he'll be relieved to know I'm almost at one hundred percent and he can go back to his own duties.

"Any word on the threats?"

"Nothing. Shit has been quiet since you got attacked. I'm starting to believe they may have been behind it."

I shake my head carefully. "I don't think so. None of the men seemed to recognize me and I don't think they were affiliated. If it was whoever was after both our families, I think they would have gloated about having me cornered with no protection."

Now that I think about my disappearing act, I realize how foolish I was. I let words put me in danger to almost be kidnapped or worse by someone that means the St. Clair's and Whitlock's no good. I could have gotten everyone killed because I didn't use my fucking brain. That tanks my mood, taking away the good feeling I had because I didn't wake up dizzy with a throbbing headache.

"I'm gonna take a shower in my room," I tell Carter grumpily and take a step towards the door.

His hand wraps around my waist, pulling me back against him. He's taller and not as wide as me, but he's still hard and strong. I lean into him, sighing when he keeps me upright. God, my head is so fucked up when it comes to Carter. I like how he touches me and how he takes care of me, but my mind is still stuck on him being my enemy. I'm not supposed to like anything he does, just because he's a Whitlock.

But there's no denying that my body lights up when he touches me. When he's near, I feel a tingle all over my skin, an awareness to him that I've never felt for anyone else. I'm so fucking confused and I don't know who to talk to about it. No one I know is married to their enemy and is confused by his touch and his nearness.

Carter bends to my ear and says, "I don't think so. You could fall and hurt yourself. You'll shower in here while I shave, and I'll get in after you. Unless you want me to help wash your back." His lips land on my shoulder and the crook of my neck. The wetness of his tongue makes me shiver when it darts out to taste me.

"You can," slips from my mouth before I think too much about it. Even if I'm trying to figure out if I like him as a person, I know I like his body against mine.

I feel his smile against my skin as he wraps himself tighter around me. "I'll wash your back if you wash mine."

"Ugh," I groan, squirming out of his arms. "Let go. We have to get to work, right?" His chuckle makes a flush bloom over my skin.

Even though I'm not dizzy, I still take it slow, taking my time to get to the bathroom and start the shower. I undress and step under the warm spray, sighing when the hot water splashes across my body. I've been relegated to sponge baths from Carter for the past week. It's nice to stand under my own steam and have the water beat down on me.

The shower door opens and cool breeze wafts in before Carter closes it. I stare at Carter's naked body. I've seen him with just his underwear on, but never his entire body naked as the day he was born.

Fuck, Carter is a work of art. Tattooed everywhere above the waist and more littered here and there on his legs. Muscles ripple under tan flesh. My eyes take him in, stopping when I get to his cock. It's big. Bigger than I remember and hard as a rock, sticking straight out at me. I swallow the saliva that pools in my mouth.

He looks like he tastes good. His large dick and heavy balls bob in the air, as if taunting me.

"See something you like?" Carter asks, stopping just out of reach. This shower is large enough and has enough shower heads that he could stay on his side and I stay on mine, but it's obvious Carter isn't having any of that.

I take another lazy perusal of his body, not missing an inch of skin. I do like what I see. There's no denying how fucking sexy he is.

After staring at his body for an indescribable amount of time, I raise my gaze to his eyes. "Yes."

Carter raises an eyebrow, a teasing smile curving his lips. "Yeah? Show me."

I close the distance between us and lower myself to my knees. Looking up at him, I sit back on my heels and open my mouth. I'm taking a chance by lowering myself before Carter so readily. So easily. My brain is telling me not to kneel for him, but my body wants it. I want him in my mouth. But will he give me shit about it? Will he fuck with me for giving myself over to him?

The filthy smile and flash of heat in those azure eyes wipes away all my apprehension. He's not taunting me, he's reveling in me being on my knees for him. Something unfurls in my chest. It's the first time I've felt like I've done something right. The first time I feel like someone might be...proud of me.

Carter steps forward, dragging his fingers in my hair. "Look at you. So pretty on your knees for me." A jolt goes through me at his compliment and my dick lengthens impossibly fast.

Pretty? I'm not sure why my body reacted the way it did to that one word. It's simple really. Six tiny letters, but they do something to me that I didn't think possible. My cheeks warm and I feel the warmth spread all the way down my chest. I'm probably beet red, and it has nothing to do with the temperature of the shower.

Carter catches my reaction, tilting his head to the side. "You like being pretty for me?"

Almost in a daze, I nod slowly. God, I hope he doesn't use this to embarrass me. But I'm too far gone to worry about it right now.

"Good," he murmurs, sliding his dick across my tongue. "I like you being pretty for me. I like you on your knees for me. Close your mouth around me." I do what he says, sucking on the head of his cock. A groan leaves me when his precum floods my mouth.

God, he tastes so fucking good. I want more.

Grabbing the base of his cock, I start to bob my head up and down, sucking him deeper and deeper until my nose presses against his trimmed pubes.

"Fuck," Carter says when my throat spasms as I gag. "Deep throating me, baby? Fuck yes."

Carter rocks into my mouth, pulling more groans from deep within me that I didn't think were there.

All my life, I've been the aggressive one, the one to fuck someone's throat or take them hard. Even when I bottomed, I was always in charge, always the one running the show. With Carter, it's the complete opposite and I can't get enough. I didn't know this side of me existed and it scares the shit out of me, making me more wary of opening myself up to Carter. But it feels so fucking good.

Something else that will do my head in when I really think about it.

His fingers tangle in my hair, the digits stroking across my scalp as he fucks into my face. I clamp my mouth tighter around him, bobbing my head as I raise my hand to stroke him from base to tip. Carter hisses, using his fingers in my hair to tip my head back. "Your mouth is fucking deadly, my pretty baby. You're gonna make me come. Slow down."

I don't slow down. I want to taste him. My prize is the eruption of his pleasure, and I want it on my tongue, down my throat, warming my belly.

While maintaining eye contact with him—so I can see the expressions on his face as I bring him pleasure—I drag my tongue up the underside of his cock, flicking it over the small space just below his cockhead. Carter's eyes darken, and he bites his lip, dragging the plump flesh into his mouth.

I pull his dick from between my lips and slap it against my tongue, moaning as the heavy weight lands over and over.

"Filthy boy," he murmurs, soft pants leaving his mouth. "I'm going to come if you keep this up."

"That's what I'm counting on," I tell him in a scratchy voice from his rough throat fucking.

Engulfing his dick in my mouth once more, I suck on him faster, wanting to draw that release from him. I need it like my next breath.

Carter gets a better grip on my hair—being careful of my stitches—and thrusts harder into my face. My throat will be sore from how he's fucking it, but I don't care. His spend will make it better.

Looking up at him, I see how the muscles of his neck stand out in sharp relief and how the veins in his arms are engorged from how he's gripping at my head. His chest rises and falls quickly and sharp groans leave his throat. His curses fill the air, wrapping around me like a hug.

For the first time in a long time, I feel powerful. I feel like I hold someone's pleasure in my hands. It's the first time I've needed to drive someone wild.

"You gonna swallow for me?" He asks, picking up the pace. "Want to taste me?"

I flick my eyes up to him, hoping he understands that yes, I fucking want it.

He does.

A curse leaves his throat, and that's my only warning. Then my mouth is flooded with his release, the thick, salty taste coating my tongue. I swallow quickly, trying to catch it all, but some still escapes.

His release goes on and on, the eruptions making me giddy with lust.

Even when he's done blowing his load, I still suckle at him, trying to draw out more of his delicious flavor. Carter hisses but lets me keep going until I've had my fill.

When I pull him from between my lips, Carter drags me to my feet and slams his mouth down on mine. I whimper, wrapping my arms around him as I let him plunder my mouth.

One of his strong hands drops to my hard dick and tugs on me, jerking me off roughly. It's exactly what I need.

Not even a minute later, I'm moaning into the kiss and spraying Carter's thigh with my spunk. He hums in my mouth, nipping at my bottom lip as he pulls away.

My breath saws in and out of my lungs and I feel dizzy for a reason other than my concussion. What did Carter just do to me? I submitted to him, readily and freely and enjoyed myself so much that I could barely contain my orgasm. I'm still flying high on him calling me pretty. No one has ever said anything like that to me. And it sounded like Carter meant it, that it wasn't something he said to get me to suck his dick.

Handsome, cute, sexy, hot as fuck. I heard it all and it was nice. But being called pretty by a man like Carter hit different. I don't think it's a feeling I'll forget anytime soon.

He nips my bottom lip once more, then pulls back to look into my eyes. "How's your head?"

I giggle. Actually fucking giggle and it makes Carter's eyes grow wide with surprise and a bit of heat. "Fuzzy as fuck. I think I need to lie down."

Carter curses and turns the water off. "Fuck, Kai. Why didn't you say something?"

I wave him off. "I'm good, Carter. Jesus. I just...my head is floaty. Not in a bad way." I open eyes I didn't know I closed. "That was...different."

A crooked smile graces his face, crinkling the corners of his bright eyes. "Different bad?"

Despite not wanting to show Carter everything, I shake my head slowly. "No. Not bad."

His smile turns self-assured as he turns the water back on. "I aim to please, pretty baby." I gasp at his words. He hasn't called me any pet names outside of sex. Again, he's doing my head in. "Let me wash you. Then we really gotta work."

Carter quickly cleans us up. By the time I get out of the shower, I'm dizzy again. He sits me on the bed and helps me get dressed while I rest. When I'm dressed, the room is no longer spinning, and I can stand without swaying.

Even still, Carter wraps his arm around my waist and walks me down to his office. I pull out my phone and call Nico so I can check in with him. I haven't seen much of him besides giving him orders on what I needed done while I was laid up in bed. He tells me he'll catch up with me when he's done doing bitch work for Pop, which makes me roll my eyes.

I haven't talked to Pop since that day in the casino. Looks like he took what Carter said to heart and won't talk to me. A pang goes through my chest that he wouldn't even fight for me, but I also chide myself because I should know that Charles St. Clair will do nothing he doesn't want to do. He hates me and always will. I need to let him go just as he's already let me go.

Rummaging on his desk, Carter pulls a folder from a pile of papers and hands it to me as I sit down in a vacant chair. "I know you don't like me looking through shit with your family, but I don't listen to anything you say. So..." He sits down and laughs when I glare at him. "Just look. You'll appreciate me being nosey."

After glaring at him for a few more moments, I flick the folder open and look at the paperwork inside. My eyebrows dip as I read "Deed of Ownership" on the first page. I look down the page and see my name, beside Indigo Arc Casino.

"What is this?" I ask, glancing up at Carter.

"It's the deed for the Indigo. I wanted to see if you had any legal recourse to rebuild the casino with your construction company by going around Charlie or bidding on it. While I was looking, I found the deed. It's yours, Kai. You don't have to ask for shit. You can rebuild or you can outsource it. But the casino belongs to you, not Charlie. The other three, larger casinos are in Charlie's name and there's nothing you can do to touch those. But this one," he taps his index finger on the folder in my hand, "is yours to do with what you want."

A swirl of emotions riots in my belly. What the fuck was Pop thinking? Why would he put the casino in my name but not tell me? Why would he pretend it wasn't mine? What's his end game? I'll have to call him and figure this shit out. Pop is so confusing, doing shit without telling anyone. That's not good for business.

I toss the papers on his desk and shake my head. "Well, I guess when I get in touch with Pop, I'll let him know I'll be rebuilding the casino, since it's mine."

Carter hums in agreement. "I don't know shit about construction, but I'm willing to help with the money aspect. Make sure your funds going to the right places and the right people."

I frown. "I'll need that, since I have to kill one or more of my accountants for stealing from me."

Mischief fills his eyes, and I find myself smiling at him. "Want help with that too?"

"Nah. Whoever it is, they're mine. But you're welcome to watch."

"Perfect," he says, rubbing his hands together.

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CHAPTER 14



KAI

"ai, please," James cries as I drag the blade down his side, splitting the flesh. He thrashes hard trying to get away from my blade, but it's no use. He's tied up tight, mine to slice as I please. "I'm sorry. I'll pay you back. All of it. Just...stop. It hurts."

His screams light me up inside and I grin as I take stock of his new wound. The muscle under is visible for only a moment before blood begins to pour out of him like a fountain. I press my fingers into the wound, relishing how James howls and thrashes about.

After a few days of digging into my financials, Carter recognized a pattern in the theft. Every time James input information into the electronic records, there was a discrepancy from what he wrote manually. From the research I did after hacking into his banking app, I saw that he would then transfer that money to his personal account, spending it on bullshit. In total, James stole three hundred grand from me over two years. He probably would have continued to get away with it if he didn't get greedy last month and this month.

He releases harsh breaths when I remove my fingers, his eyes rolling in the back of his head and his face pale from pain. I tsk at him and toss the paring knife back on the table and grab the boning knife. I can get into smaller spots with this blade, and I'm not done playing yet.

In a voice that's almost soothing, I say, "James, you stole from me. Not once. Not twice, but over fifty times. You pocketed money that didn't

belong to you even after I paid you handsomely. You don't think you should pay for that?" James lowers his head, thick tears leaking down his cheeks.

He twists and turns on the hook hanging from the ceiling in The Fox Club, trying to get away from me, but Manuel socks him in the mouth, making him go limp. "Thanks Manuel. His moving was starting to irritate me."

Manuel laughs. "I know. I got you, boss." He steps back and stands beside Carter, who watches me with heated eyes.

I'm surprised Manuel and Carter hit it off so quickly. When I introduced them, they shook hands, then starting talking about what we do down here. It was...a little disorienting, but it's better than my husband going head-to-head with everyone I work with. I'd have to kill them all for their disrespect.

I never thought the day would come where I would put Carter over anyone. But over the past few weeks, something has shifted between us. I'm trying hard to meet him halfway in whatever this is. He has no issues pushing past whatever issues we've had in the past. He keeps telling me he owns me and I'm starting to believe him.

Fighting to keep the flush off my cheeks, I palm the knife and step back up to James. "Wanna tell me why you were skimming money, James? I pay you better than any accountant in the state. Well above average for any accountant anywhere, and I add in other incentives. What were you missing?"

"Nothing," he answers with a pained groan. "I just...I wanted more."

I jam the knife between his ribs on the left side, smiling at his shout of pain, followed by wheezing. I'm sure I punctured his lung with that. I only have a little more time to toy with him before he dies on me.

"Fuck," Carter whispers, and I grin, even though I don't turn around to look at him.

"He's good at this," Manuel tells my husband. "Slices em up just right. I've learned a lot."

"You're right about that."

His compliments and how they talk about me shouldn't mean so much. But fuck if it doesn't make my chest swell.

I flick the knife around, looking for somewhere else to stick James. Just a bit more blood and I'll feel sated. Stepping closer to him, I slowly drag the blade across the soft part of his belly, tearing open the flesh. James can barely muster a sound of anguish as he struggles to breathe.

"You made the mistake of your life when you stole from me," I tell him in a low growl. "After all I've given you, you fucked me over."

"You're a monster," James says, his head drooping as blood flows from every conceivable part of his body.

Grinning, I bring the knife to his neck and stab him in the jugular. His eyes widen as he jerks and thrashes, trying to tilt his neck to stem the blood. I grab him by the hair and pull his head to the side, letting the blood flow freely.

"You shouldn't have crossed this monster then." James looks at me with pleading eyes, gives one more gurgle, then lets out a long, harsh breath.

I turn to Manuel and Carter. "Cut him down," I say to Manuel. He nods and grabs a butchers knife from my collection and cuts the ropes. He lets James drop to the floor without care, the body crumpling at our feet.

I walk over to the table and pick up the cleaver that is sharpened to a point. I twirl it around and hold it out to Carter. "Want to cut his hands off?"

Carter smiles and pushes off the wall. He takes the cleaver from my hand, then turns me around, pulling my back to his front. Bending down to my ear, he murmurs, "Watching you work made my dick hard." To emphasize his point, he rolls his hips, his cock brushing against my back.

My cheeks heat, but I push him away and motion towards James's dead body. "Keep it in your pants, Whitlock, or you'll get DNA all over the body." He shoots me that crooked grin I'm getting so used to. "His hands."

Manuel and another one of my men grab James and slams his body on the table where my knives just were. Carter arranges him until he gets him in a good position to lop off his hands at the wrist. He looks at me before he brings the cleaver down. "You want to come to my dad's house with me tonight? We have dinner every week where we talk about business and shit." He brings the cleaver down, making a clean cut on James's wrist.

I noticed Carter leaving around six in the evening once a week but never asked why. The only time he didn't leave is when I was laid up in bed with a concussion.

"Dinner. With your family."

"Yeah." He moves to the other side of the table and chops off the other hand. "It's just family. No one but our right-hand men. So you can bring Nico."

I stare at him as he tosses the hand he just chopped off to Manuel so he can deliver the package to his wife. When we encounter thieves, we leave their hands for their next of kin so they know why they died. And so they can have something to bury since we torch the corpses.

We've been married for close to three months at this point. Why invite me to dinner now? What is their angle? Did Dominic put Carter up to this? Maybe he wants to get close to his enemy's son.

I'm not sure what Dominic would expect to pull out of me about Pop. Even if Pop isn't a good father, I'm loyal to my family.

I want to know what their angle is, so I nod. "Yeah, we'll join you. I'm sure Nico won't mind tagging along." I drag my eyes up and down his body, taking in his dark jeans tight shirt and those heavy boots. He looks good. But a suit on him makes him fucking edible. "Wear a suit tonight for me, yeah?"

He bends down and plants his lips on mine, stealing a kiss. "Okay."



"I FEEL like the sky is falling, seeing you in a suit twice in one week," Dominic says to Carter as we step inside. "Looks like your husband is rubbing off on you." He winks at me, then brings Carter in for a hug. "You look nice."

"They make me itch, Dad," Carter grumbles like a petulant child and it makes me laugh against my better judgment.

Dominic looks me over, taking in the faint bruising still on my face. "Kaison. How are you feeling, son?"

The word slips out of his mouth so effortlessly, but it makes my chest constrict. This man, from a family that's supposed to loathe mine, has no problem claiming me as his son. Not for the first time, I wonder what my life would be like if I'd had a father like Dominic. Carter and Declan are still hard asses, not taking any shit and will shoot someone at the slightest sign of disrespect. And they grew up in a house where love was freely given.

Clearing the lump in my throat, I hold my hand out to shake his. "I'm good. Better now."

"That's good." Dominic holds his hand out to Nico. "Nice to see you again, boss. Come on in. Let's get some grub and talk."

We all follow Dominic to a large dining room. Declan and his right-hand man are already seated. When he sees Nico, Declan's face sets in a hard mask. He's probably still pissed at his snarky remark on the way back from the hospital.

His eyes flick over to me, and he huffs. "Really wish you had let him die like I suggested," Declan says to Carter.

Carter beats me to a reply. "Declan. Let me say this one time and one time only. I will fuck you up if you suggest you want my husband dead again. You got me?"

My heart flutters in my chest. Holy fuck. Carter is taking up for me against Declan? He and Declan are close, usually on the same wavelength about everything. Something about his easy defense of me has everything coming into focus. Carter really is all in.

What's holding me back? Fear? Holding on to our rivalry, a rivalry that doesn't matter anymore?

Declan opens his mouth as if to test him, but he thinks better of it and closes it, shaking his head with a scoff. "Whatever. Where's dinner?"

"Why don't you go check," Dominic says with a glare, "instead of pissing everybody off before we even sit down? Christ, Declan. Me and ya Ma raised you with more manners than that." Dominic face flashes with pain and Carter lays his hand on his shoulder and squeezes gently.

I heard about Carter's mother being killed when they were kids. That's when the streets were filled with bodies and the FBI came to our little slice of Jersey, trying to get to the bottom of why so many bodies were piled in the morgue. Dominic killed everyone that was involved with his assassination attempt and his wife's death himself. No one was allowed to pull the trigger. From that time period alone, Dominic was responsible for eighteen bodies.

It's hard for me to wrap my head around loving someone that much. That kind of love is unfathomable. Would I ever lose my mind and kill a fucking baseball team of people for someone? I glance over at Carter. I don't think so, but my feelings for him are blurring. So, I'm not so sure. I'm not sure I want a love that deep either.

Declan doesn't say anything, just leaves the dining room with a huff. His right-hand man, Hendrix I think his name is, follows behind him, a smirk on his face. He must be used to this behavior.

Carter sits down and motions for me to take the seat beside him. "Declan won't start more shit. He's pissy because he's not getting attention anymore."

"Your brother has been a pain in my ass for years. I'm sure it's not going to stop now," I say to Carter. He grunts.

Shortly after, Declan and Hendrix come back out carrying a few platters, followed by the staff of the house. They set everything down and Dominic declares, "Dig in everyone."

Having dinner at the Whitlock house is unlike anything I've ever experienced. There's conversation, jokes, fucking *laughter*. When I had dinner with Pop, we'd sit in silence until he told me what I needed to do and how I was making the family look bad. This dinner is nothing like those awful experiences.

About thirty minutes later, the table is cleared, and dessert is set out in front of us. Cheesecake and ice cream.

Dominic picks up his spoon and eats a bite of cake. "So, Kai," he says before he swallows his food. "How's married life treating you?"

"You're son is an overbearing pain in my ass," I answer honestly, though I can't help the smile on my face.

Dominic barks a laugh. "Yeah, his Ma said the same about me. He gets that from his old man." His chest puffs out with pride as he looks at Carter. Then his smile drops. "Look, I know this situation ain't ideal and this is the last place you wanna be. But we're family now. You'll always be family. No matter what."

There's that damn lump in my throat again. I don't think I can clear it without drawing attention to the fact that I'm choked up, so I just nod and shove some ice cream in my mouth.

For as long as I can remember, our families haven't gotten along. Dominic and Pop traded shots literally and figuratively. They'd buy businesses out from under each other, steal each other's customers, kill each other's men. But now, I'm sitting at the table with him, breaking bread and he says I'm family. I might be a fool, but I don't think he's bullshitting me. I think when I tied myself to Carter, no matter if it's for survival or not, he started to see me as his son.

It feels good but it also hurts. I had to do nothing but take Carter's last name for Dominic to see me as a son. My own father thinks I'm an inconvenience, only serving the purpose of taking on the family name when he retires or dies. To Pop, I'm nothing.

We finish up dinner, which was actually a lot of fun. Besides Dominic choking me up, I got to know Dominic and Declan more. Declan grudgingly spoke to me, glowering at me most of the time, but everyone joined in the conversation. I'm sure Pop would never extend an invitation to Carter or anyone in the Whitlock family.

While Carter is saying goodbye to his family, Nico and I wait by the front door. "Dominic is different than I thought he'd be," Nico comments.

I agree. While it's obvious he's a hard assed man and will kill anyone for any reason he deemed worthy, he also has this whole other side to him that's funny and kind of loving. It's not what I expected from the stories I've heard about him, but I think that makes him a better man.

Declan and Hendrix brush past us, with Declan giving Nico a scathing look. Nico's face is impassive, following Declan with his eyes. Before Declan turns away, Nico winks at him. My brother-in-law's face turns tomato red, and he scowls before he storms out. Hendrix looks back with a raised eyebrow and Nico shrugs. So much in that exchange without words.

"Leave him alone, Nico," I chide.

"I did nothing." But knowing Nico and how he knows he's getting under Declan's skin, he'll continue to taunt him. I'm not sure if that will result in a bullet to his brain or an explosive night. Either way, he needs to be careful with Declan.

Carter and Dominic follow behind them a few seconds later. Instead of shaking my hand, Dominic brings me in for a quick one-armed hug. "Come back next week, son. I'd love to have you both."

Again with the son.

"I'll be here. Thanks Dominic," I say, sounding halfway normal.

He bids us goodnight and we head home.

Nico breaks off from us when we get back to the house and heads upstairs, bidding us good night as he goes to his room.

When we step inside our space, I grab Carter's hand and pull him close to me. He wraps his arms around my waist without hesitation and I sigh against him when I hold him tight.

Tonight showed me that I might be worth it. Maybe not to Pop or even most of the St. Clair family, but to Carter, to Dominic, I am.

Carter tucks his head into my shoulder and breathes me in. "You smell like me. You smell like *mine*."

I shudder in his arms as he kisses all over my neck and sucks marks into me. I should tell him to stop. I shouldn't want his ownership branded into my skin, but it feels so fucking good and I'm so fucking raw right now. I need Carter to put me back together; to make everything feel better so I don't walk around with this weight sitting on my chest. The weight of knowing that someone thinks I'm worth it, that someone *wants* me.

He pulls back, looking down at me as he cups my cheek. "You okay?"

Going for honesty, I shake my head. "But you can make me better right?" I push his jacket from his shoulders, and it pools to the floor.

Carter takes my lips in a hard kiss, shoving his tongue into my mouth to lick at me. I moan into him, my chest feeling lighter now that his mouth is on mine. He maneuvers me to the bed, not removing his mouth for even a second.

After we tumble onto the bed, Carter snatches his mouth from mine. "Get undressed," he pants, bending down to kiss me once more. "I've been dreaming about this ass for weeks."

I kick off my shoes and scramble out of my clothes. Carter watches me with a faint grin on his face while taking his time getting naked.

"Look at you," he says, kneeling on the bed in front of me, dragging his hand down my chest. "I'd love to see my name tattooed. Right here." He places his hand over my heart, and I'm sure he feels how hard it starts thumping at his suggestion.

That would be the ultimate sign of ownership. It would show me, him, and the world that he claims me, that he wants me.

It would show them that I'm his.

"Okay," I whisper, licking my lips nervously. "Okay."

His eyes flare. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck, you don't know how fucking hot that is." He grabs my hand and puts it on his chest. "Yours will be here. Because you own me too."

My breath stutters in my chest and my eyes well with tears. Fuck, how does he know what to say? How does he know what I want to hear? Carter is so sure of what we have, so confident that he wants to be with me. I've never really had anything of my own before. Material things sure, but nothing like Carter. Nothing like my husband.

Fuck it. I'm jumping off the cliff with him. I'm not going to keep questioning things. What's the point? Carter won't let me go.

And I don't want him to.

"Okay," I whisper again.

Carter kisses me again, then climbs off the bed and goes to his nightstand rummaging around until he pulls out the lube.

He makes quick work of stretching me out, fucking me with his fingers. He watches my every move, cataloging my every exhalation, every moan, every twitch.

"You sound like a fucking dream, baby," Carter croons as he removes his fingers. "But now I want you to scream for me. I'm going to fuck you hard enough to make you hoarse. I want you fucking wrecked when I'm done with you."

I'm wrecked now just listening to him.

He flips me over and pulls my hips off the bed, then pushes my face down onto the mattress. "You look good like this." Carter slaps my ass, both cheeks stinging from his swats.

"Fuck," I moan, pushing back for more.

"Oh, I see what you like, baby. Don't worry. We'll play one day. For now, I need in you. I'll take my time later."

With that, Carter slams into me to the hilt. My mouth opens in a strangled scream, my breath caught in my chest. So good. Feels so fucking good. My ass clenches around him, sucking him in as far as he'll go.

"Damn, Kai." He rolls his hips, thrusting into me. "This ass belongs to me." He grips my waist tight, fucking me hard.

"Yes," I groan, bouncing my ass back on his cock. "Tell me...how good...I am."

It's ridiculous to want him to praise me, but his words always wake up some part of me that makes me feel warm. It makes my entire body come alive. I fucking bloom for him when he tells me I'm good for him.

Carter pulls me up until my back is to his chest, holding me close as he fucks me deep. "You're so good for me, Kai. Always so good. You're good at taking my cock. Good at making me come. So fucking good." He punctuates all his sentences with a deep stroke that knocks against my prostate deliciously.

"Yes, Carter. Yes. Please."

He reaches down and grasps my dick, jerking me hard and fast. "I love it when you say my name. Love when my pretty baby begs for me."

"Oh fuck. Oh god. Carter, *fuck!*" Pleasure licks down my spine and settles into my balls. One more tug on my dick and I'm coming all over the bed, my cock spraying rope after rope of my release in front of me.

Carter bites into my shoulder, groaning as he fucks me harder. The sound of skin slapping fills the room, amplifying my pleasure. My sensitivity doesn't even matter as I absorb his strokes, his big cock stretching my walls to their limits.

His teeth sink harder into my shoulder as he growls. The sound burrows into my ears, sending another, harder orgasm buzzing through me. I curse and whine as more cum shoots out of me, coating Carter's fist.

"Your ass is squeezing my dick, baby. Fuck, I'm coming." He grunts loudly and comes on a shudder. His cum coats my ass, warming me from the inside. His teeth clamping back around my shoulder as he thrusts lazily into me.

I moan tiredly, my throat fucked from my moaning. "Thank you," I whisper. I'm not only thanking him for fucking me senseless and for giving me the praise I crave, but also for making it okay to move through our past and be something...more. Something else. Something new.

I'm not sure what's going to happen between us in the future. There's someone trying to exterminate both of our families, intent to see us in the dirt. But right now, in this room with Carter, none of that matters. All that matters is us. Me and him. Our union, our pairing, our marriage. Everything else is background noise.

Carter sighs, his warm breath drifting over my shoulder, where his teeth marks are embedded in my skin. "Anything for you, Kaison."

He rests his head between my shoulder blades and breathes in deeply. It's not the first time he's done something like that, and I like it more than I should say.

"You smell so good, Kai. You smell like me."

"You're obsessed with me," I say with a lazy chuckle.

"I am."

I'm at a loss on what to say, but Carter doesn't seem to mind. He kisses the back of my neck lightly, then pulls out of me. I groan at the feeling of emptiness, wanting him back inside me. A hiss flows from my lips as he pushes three fingers inside my hole, fucking them in and out of me slowly. "Love seeing my cum leaking out of this pretty hole. I want to fill you every day." He gets down on his knees, still fingering my sensitive pucker. "Fuck, you're gaping, baby."

One minute, he's pegging my prostate with his thick fingers. The next, his tongue takes their place, licking inside me slowly.

"Carter. Oh fuck," I groan, pushing back against his face. "Yes. Christ!"

His warm, wet tongue tunnels through me, licking along my swollen and sore entrance. He licks from my balls to my crack, collecting his release, then spitting it back against my hole just to repeat the motion. I'm fucking dizzy with pleasure.

Warm hands spread me open as he devours me. I gyrate my hips, ecstasy rocketing through me. I don't think I can come again, but the feel of his thick tongue pressing into me and lapping me up is too good to tell him to stop.

When he's had his fill, Carter flips me onto my back and blankets me with his body. I land in the wet spot, but I couldn't give a fuck. Feeling Carter's leaner body arched over me has me forgetting everything but him.

He brings his mouth down to mine and opens, his cum dribbling from his mouth into mine. I lap it up, then pull him down to me, trading his taste and my flavor back and forth until I swallow.

A long moan leaves my lips as I drink him down when his cock burrows back into me.

"Fuck, Kaison. I can't get enough of you," he groans as he pushes his dick as far into me as he can. "So fucking slick. So warm. Because of me. You're soaked with my cum, pretty baby." A shiver rolls through me at being called pretty. And he knows it.

Carter smiles down at me as he pounds me into the mattress. That smile twists into one of pleasurable pain, the muscles in his neck standing out in sharp relief. "Christ, I'm going to come. Dammit, Kai. I can't...fuck!" He stills over me, biting his lower lip.

When his balls are empty, he collapses on me. I chuckle, wrapping my legs around him more snugly. Carter turns his head and takes my mouth in a lazy kiss.

"You take my dick really well. I don't think I've ever fucked anyone that hard before."

"Probably because you haven't hated anyone you've fucked before."

His grin is soft as he looks down at me, pushing strands of my hair from my face. "I don't hate you anymore, Kai. I told you, I like you."

"Why?" I ask. I really need to know the answer so I can figure out what the fuck I'm feeling. I want to know if it makes sense to him that he made a complete one eighty when it comes to me.

Carter tilts his head as he looks down at me. "You're my husband. Better to let go of the hate for you so I don't live miserably in my own home."

"That's it?"

I know he's going to say something completely unserious when his mouth tips up in that crooked smile I like so much. "And because you're pretty."

Scoffing—even though my limbs tingle from the compliment—I push against his chest. "Get off. I have cum on my back."

He chuckles and pulls out of me. I immediately feel his seed leaking from my hole. It feels good. "Let's shower. We can change the sheets when we get back to bed."

We don't waste time in the shower. I'm exhausted and we both have to work in the morning. Carter washes my back to clean off my cum and kisses the back of my neck, but that's about it. Before we get out, I make sure my hole is pretty much clean of his spunk so I'm not leaking in the middle of the night.

Once out of the shower, we get dressed and change the sheets on the bed. Carter has a small smirk on his face as he looks at the sheets, seemingly proud of his work. I roll my eyes at him.

Bed made, we lie down on our backs, looking at the ceiling. I'm tired, wanting to get to sleep, but I can't stop thinking about Dominic and the look on his face when he mentioned Carter's mom.

"Carter?" He hums in the dark. "What happened to your mom?" He tenses beside me, but I don't take the question back. I'm sure it may have come up in the future, but I want to know right now.

He's quiet for a while. I know he hasn't fallen asleep, judging from the calming breaths he's taking. I'm not sure where he went in his head, but I'm not going to break the silence to ask. If he doesn't want to answer, he doesn't have to. But the question is out there.

Finally, he says, "Dad was having issues with some guys from Virginia. We had the same heroin connect and they'd run into each other every now

and then. I guess they wanted to expand and instead of trying to work with Dad, they figured a hostile takeover was the best option."

I remember that time, though vaguely. Pop was telling our men to steer clear of the trouble with the guys from Virginia. They came to Jersey to buy up any real estate they could but never got further than a few commercial buildings before everything came to a head.

Clearing his throat, he continues. "They sent my dad his brother's hand when they caught Uncle Anton alone with his mistress in a hotel room. Then they sent him pieces. Dad decided then to go to war. He wanted to keep the streets clean to avoid collateral damage. But when my uncle was killed, he said fuck it and marshaled all of our people to squash the family both here and in Virginia. Before he could, they caught us leaving the house."

He swallows audibly, probably thinking back to a time when he thought he was safe. When he thought everything would be okay. But that was shattered by bullets in the night.

"We were run off the road," he says in a voice so low, I have to strain to hear him. "Our driver died on impact, from bullets or the accident itself we could never tell. The men with us tried to stop the shooters, but there were too many. My mom, she shielded me and Declan, making sure no bullets hit us. When she saw Dad still passed out from the impact, she brought him over to us, covering him as well. Bullets...tore through her back. She didn't have a chance."

"Fuck," I whisper into the dark. I knew she was killed, but I never knew how close he was to meeting the same fate with her.

He continues as if I didn't say anything. "Right after the last bullet embedded itself in her body, Dad regained consciousness. I guess the knowledge that the love of his life was shot and killed was enough to give him some kind of super strength. He was able to kill every single man that was shooting at our car. All except one." He swallows again, but I can hear the smile in his voice. The sheer pride makes me smile too. "One was mine. The first man I killed was in revenge of my mother."

"How old were you?"

"Ten."

My eyes widen as I look over at him. "Ten? Jesus. I didn't get my first body until I was thirteen."

"Well, I am better than you, Kaison," he says and looks at me and shoots me a wink. His smile drops as he finishes. "I didn't have a choice. When Dad got out of the car to return fire, one of the guys was creeping up behind him. I couldn't let them kill my dad too. So, I found the gun on my dad's bodyguard and I shot him.

"After that," he says, "Dad went kind of out of his mind for a bit. He killed every man and woman that came from Virginia, then went to their home base and killed them all too. There is no one left from that family. No one who can seek revenge on Dad. The family will be forgotten and it's no more than they deserve."

Dominic is a fucking bad ass. To kill for the person you love like that is...kind of unhinged, but the ultimate sign of love.

"Do you miss her?" I whisper, not looking at him because I don't think I can stand the pain that will more than likely be etched on his face.

The long exhale he releases makes my heart clench. "Everyday. She was a good mother. Tough as fuck and she knew what this business was about. She's the one that taught me how to fire a weapon."

"No shit?"

"No shit," he says with a chuckle. "She was perfect for Dad. They were perfect together." The bed shifts as he turns to me. I turn on my side to look at him as well. "What about your mom? I've never seen your dad with anyone."

I shrug. "I don't know who she is. All Pop told me is she burdened him with me before I turned one."

Carter winces. "That's fucked up. Are you sure you're Charlie's? You two are nothing alike."

"I'm sure. He got a DNA test done as soon as she dropped me off. And he'd agree that I'm nothing like him. Especially because I like dick."

He rolls his eyes. "So do I. Do you want to find your mom?"

"Nah. No need. I'm twenty-five years old. She had twenty-four years to find me. Not like she doesn't know where I am. I'm not missing out on anything by her not being around."

That's the truth. It's shitty that she left me with someone like Pop, but she didn't want me. I don't wish she was around like I wish Pop was.

The words that come out of my mouth aren't supposed to. They're supposed to stay put, my secret from the world. But Carter has my guard down. He shared so much with me about his mother; turnabout is fair play, I

suppose. "I'm not sure why what Pop thinks about me is so important. I know being gay doesn't make me less than and I get respect from everyone because I don't take shit and will kill without a second thought. But over the years, hearing him repeatedly tell me I'm an embarrassment to the family name makes me want to show him I can carry the St. Clair family and do a damn good job at it."

Carter's warm hand lands on my cheek and I close my eyes at his touch. My heart that was just hammering in my chest slows to a steady thump.

"Look at me, Kaison." I flick my eyes open and meet his gaze. "Fuck Charlie. Fuck him and all his bullshit. You don't need him. You're a Whitlock now. What you do is for *our* family. You understand?"

A smile tugs up my lips at his word. Carter and I are family. The St. Clair-Whitlocks. It's us, me and him. "I think I like you too, Carter."

The deep rumble of his laughter makes me smile wider. "I know you do. I'm fucking irresistible."

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CHAPTER 15



CARTER

ever in a million years would I have thought I'd be obsessed with Kaison fucking St. Clair. Never thought I'd feel anything towards him but hatred and loathing. Never thought how he feels would mean anything to me.

But something shifted when I hurt him at the casino, then seeing those bruises on him after he ran away. I've put plenty of bruises on him myself when I tried to beat him into the ground, but he gave as good as he got. What happened to him at the club? That was an attack and I didn't like seeing him hurt like that. No matter how long it takes, I'll find those fuckers that thought it was okay to put their hands on what belongs to me.

That's something I'll think about later. For now, I have a date.

I pull up to Kai's construction company and put my car in park right beside his. Gavin looks over at me with a raised eyebrow. "You're weird when you're cheerful. Especially when it has to do with a St. Clair."

I shrug. "You're right. But...I don't know. He's not what I expected. He's...more. Fuck, I don't know. I sound like a fucking idiot."

"You sound like a man with a crush." Gavin smirks at me. I sock him lightly in the arm and get out of the car.

We head inside to the headquarters. Gavin hangs back in the lobby with Percy as I stride over to Kai's office.

He has his jacket off, sleeves rolled up his arms, his hair piled on top of his head in a messy bun, a few strands hanging in his face. Kai's bottom lip is pulled between his teeth in concentration, the plump flesh taking a beating from all the gnawing.

His desk is littered with papers, and pencils are strewn about. Paperweights hold down a large square of paper he's studying and making little notes on.

I rap my knuckles on the door a few times, leaning against it. Kai's head snaps up and I watch the mix of emotions cross his face. Surprise, distaste, confusion and maybe something close to like. "Carter."

"Husband." His lip twitches as if he wants to smile. "You have lunch soon."

He looks down at his watch in surprise. "I do. Shit, I lost track of time."

"What do you have going on?" I walk over to his desk and look over his shoulder. Floor plans are before him, with a list of necessary materials for a new build. "Is this for Indigo Arc?"

Exhaling roughly, he turns around and looks up at me. "I never second guess anything. If I want to do something, I get it done. I've never gone up against Pop." He shakes his head. "Up against Charlie." He pulls the hair tie out of his hair and drags his fingers through those luscious waves. "He hasn't been answering my calls. So I haven't been able to tell him I'm going to do this."

"Go see him. Make him listen. If you want, I'll come with you."

His gaze bores into me, searching my face for something. "No. I can handle it. Thanks though."

"This looks good. Knocking out these walls here," I point to the rough plans he has drawn up, "and adding another restaurant will generate more revenue. Having more tables and a high rollers room will elevate your casino. You can even add an events room. You could do small concerts, a room for those charity balls. People pay in advance for those."

Kai looks back at his hasty plans. He'll have to have an architect draw the real plans up before he starts building, but he has a good grasp on what he wants.

Picking up one of the many pencils on his desk, he erases something and draws a large room, including beams and load bearing walls. He's really good at it.

"Why didn't you become an architect?" I ask, watching him work. "Seems like you know what you're doing."

He shakes his head as he keeps sketching, his hair falling over his shoulders. I use one hand to push it back so he can see the papers in front of him. "Pop said that would take too much time from the family."

I scoff. "You know you can do tons of shit online now. That's no reason to hold yourself back."

I watch a smile spread across his face. "Maybe. I'll think about it." He finishes drawing with a flourish. Picking up the paper he tilts his head to the side and makes a *huh* noise. "That…that actually works. Can you project the revenue for the next ten years for me? Including two restaurants, a high rollers room and a possible event center?"

"Sure. It'll take about a week while I work on it, but I can get it done."

"Thanks." Kai sets the paper back on his desk and turns his chair to me. "Why are you here?"

Perching on the edge of his desk, I cross my legs at the ankle. "I came to take you to lunch. And see if you needed one of my guys to fill in until you found a new full-time accountant."

Kai nods, standing and putting on his jacket. "Actually, yeah. I think that would be good to have someone from your family working here. To blend our families and shit." I grin. "You have someone in mind?"

We discuss which one of my guys to send over as we leave the office. Kai looks at me curiously when I grab his hand and pull him to the back of his building instead of heading to our cars.

He has a table in the back where I had Gavin set up some sandwiches and drinks that I had my dad's cook make for us. When he turns to look at me, I explain. "For a while, it might be too dangerous for us to sit in a restaurant to eat. When all this shit blows over, I'll take you out for a proper date."

The blush that appears on Kai's cheeks is breathtaking. He's so fucking handsome and he's so expressive now. Everything he's feeling shows up on his face. Before, I had a hard time reading him, since Kai liked to keep his emotions to himself. Now, he shows me everything.

We sit down and I put a turkey sandwich in front of him, along with some fresh fruit and a bottle of water.

"Thanks. I'm starving." Kai digs in immediately, taking a huge bite of his food. After he swallows the food in his mouth, Kai says, almost shyly, "This is nice. I've never been on a date before. This...is a date right?"

"Yep. Me either. This is all new for me. But I'm trying. For you."

I'm shocked when his gray eyes soften, and that cute grin curves his lips. "Yeah, me too. I wanna try." Hesitantly, he holds out his hand and I grasp it. "We're probably a bunch of fools, actually liking their spouse."

Smiling at him, I give his hand a squeeze. "Nothin wrong with that." I take my hand back and bite into my sandwich. "Remember that time when we were sixteen and I saw you in that restaurant with your stupid ass friends?"

Kai gives me a dry look, then throws his napkin at me. I bat it away, laughing. "Yeah, I remember. Pop gave me shit for a week for the mess we made."

When we were sixteen, me and Gavin were skipping classes at that stuffy private school we went to and saw Kai and his lackies. I didn't plan to start shit, but when they spotted us, they walked over to our table to fuck with us. Before he could get within earshot, I was out of my chair and I tackled him to the ground. Over someone's table. While they were still eating. We caused about twenty grand worth of damage fighting and breaking shit.

"You think we would have been friends if our dads didn't hate each other?"

"Doubt it," he says. "You're an asshole." He pauses, assessing me with dipped eyebrows. "Well, I don't know. Maybe. You're actually not bad."

We sit in silence for a bit, eating and enjoying the weather. It'll turn soon, but for now, the soft breeze feels good.

Kai finishes his sandwich and plucks a few grapes from the bowl in front of him. "What was the Whitlock house like growing up? Dominic seems...warm."

I laugh. "He is and he isn't. He loves us. Everyone can see that. But he doesn't give us free passes for dumb shit. There have been plenty of times he's punished us for being reckless and careless. He taught us to fight, so there was a lot of hand to hand when we didn't listen and he had to take us down a peg or two. He was exactly what you heard about him in the streets and a good father at the same time."

He ducks his head, his eyes dull. "But you had a good father. And you had a brother. You had people."

"You grew up alone." I don't phrase it as a question.

Kai nods slowly. "Nico was around, but he didn't go to school with me or anything. His father wanted him to live a relatively normal life before he

came to guard me. We're close, but it's just him and me. Even with my friends from school, I didn't have anyone. They didn't understand the life. They knew I had money and clout, so they hung on to me like a cheap suit. Pop didn't want me to get too close to anyone. Said they could hurt me if I let them in. That's why he never got caught up in any bullshit. No one has ever been close enough to him to catch him slipping."

He tries to hide it, but I can hear the ache in his voice. All these years, he's been alone. I've had Declan and my father's men's sons around me. I always had people, friends I could count on. Charlie isolated him, made him dependent on only him, for some unknown reason. God, his father is a fucking dick.

"You know, you're not alone anymore."

"Til death do us part, right?" he asks with a grin, tapping my ring.

Leaning across the table, I plant a soft kiss on his lips. He smiles, then threads his fingers through my hair and holds me to him, taking my lips in a slow, deliberate kiss. I groan against him, wanting more of this.

I have to adjust my cock when I pull away, a grin on my face. His eyes track the movement, lust brimming in his eyes. "Keep it in your pants, St. Clair," I say when I sit down.

His laugh warms something in my chest that's been cold for too long. Since my mother died. A part of me that nothing and no one could touch. Now Kai has wormed his way in there, making me think about...forever.

I grab some strawberries and eat them. Kai does the same, the blush still on his cheeks.

After he swallows, he says, "You make a pretty good sandwich, though everything else could use some work."

I scoff a laugh. "I didn't make those. You know cooking isn't my strong suit." He grimaces, making me throw the napkin back at him. He bitched about my burned eggs and toast when he was healing from his concussion, gagging over the plate, giving himself a headache.

"If we're going to stay married, you need to learn how to cook. I don't want to be poisoned."

Surprise washes through me. "You can cook?" I mean, the bit of food I stole from him all those months ago was good, but it was just chicken and rice.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Carter. But I'm willing to share. Come on." He stands up and starts packing the containers in the bag.

"I'm going to tell Percy to close up for me. We're going to have a crash course in cooking. What's your favorite food?"

I think, because all food is my favorite. "What can you cook?"

"Everything," he says, handing me the bag. "I spent a lot of time alone. The kitchen was quiet, and Pop's old cook let me play around in there. Name it and I can cook it."

I groan, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him close to me. "That's hot as fuck. That chicken you made was pretty seasoned."

He scowls at me. "Chicken you weren't supposed to eat. That was for after my workout."

"I know. But it was fun fucking with you."

"And you got your ass beat for your trouble."

"Did I though?" I ask, remembering how his lips landed against mine when he was done tossing me around. I don't think I lost that fight at all.

His light chuckle drifts back to me. "Tell me what you want to cook, and we'll make it."

"Lasagna."

"Easy."

Shortly after Kai gives Percy instructions, we head to the grocery store—after we both call for more men to watch out for us. Neither of us are idiots. We know there's trouble lurking and we don't want to put ourselves into unnecessary danger. Kai already has extra guards patrolling his work site and seated in his lobby.

But shopping goes off without a hitch, Kai grabbing everything we need for dinner. I watch and catalog the ingredients he grabs, not wanting to forget a thing.

Once home, Kai takes off his suit jacket, rolls up his sleeves, washes his hands and gets started. Every step of the way, he tells me what he's doing. He makes the sauce from scratch, something I didn't think anyone but chef's knew how to do.

"After you have everything layered," he says, adding the mixture of sauce, ground beef and cheese to the pan of lasagna noodles, "you pop it in the oven and let it bake for forty-five minutes."

He turns to me with a free and open smile and he shifts from pretty to fucking beautiful. This is Kai, happy and in his element. If I thought he loved drawing plans for the casino, it's nothing compared to how he looks now. Fucking dazzling.

"You're good at so much shit. How did I not know?" I ask, cleaning up the mess we made.

"I'm not. Not really." I don't miss the hint of dismissal in his tone, like he's used to downplaying his achievements.

I stop cleaning the counter and turn to him. I grab his wrist before he can walk away. He comes easily, leaning against me. I push his hair back, kissing his hair when he ducks his head.

Placing my fingers under his chin, I lift his head until he's looking at me. "You're good at a lot of shit, Kai. You may not know everything about me, but you know I don't lie. All that shit Charlie put in your head? Forget it. None of it is true. You're brilliant, baby."

I can tell he doesn't believe me, but I'll spend as long as necessary hyping him up until he does.

When the lasagna is ready, we dig in. I can't stop the groan that escapes my throat. "Fucking fuck, Kai. This is amazing."

His shy, but smug smile is everything I need.

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CHAPTER 16



CARTER

he past week with Kai showed me new sides of him. He smiled more freely, laughed louder, and spoke as if we never hated each other. I've learned a lot about him, besides his love of knifing people and how good a cook he is.

Kai likes to read. Not like romance or fantasy books. But a lot of nonfiction. Books of war and the military, training his mind to think differently than any other mafia member I've ever met. He also likes dogs. It caught me by surprise that he liked animals at all.

"French bulldog," he told me when I asked what his favorite breed was.

I wrinkled my nose as I tried to scoop some filling into the ravioli that was our project for the day. "Why?"

"They're cute," he said with a shrug as he helped me out.

We talked like we were a normal married couple, not two men forced together to keep our families alive. He's nothing I expected but everything I wanted.

I always wanted what my mom and dad had, their easy love and acceptance, as well as someone that knew the game and how dangerous it was to be with someone like me.

With Kai, I have that. Not the love bit since he's just getting past his dislike for me outside of when my dick is in him. But the other stuff. The acceptable understanding of what my life is like.

I have no illusions that we're safe, that no danger exists for us right now. But we're in the bubble where all is calm, and I want to relax before shit hits the fan.

My theater room is mostly unused, since I'm either at work, with Dad and Declan, or in my home office working on casino and family business. I had it built because I thought I'd have some downtime, but there's hardly been a time that I could use it. With so many of our guys on security, walking around my house like I'm fucking Jon Gotti or something—I had more men patrol since Kai's attack just in case the guys who put him in the hospital were affiliated—I figured I had some time to catch a movie.

I click through the channels, trying to find something that will take my mind off all the shit that's going on around me. Something that will silence my reality and pull me into something that's so far-fetched that I wouldn't have a hope of it being real.

A movie adaptation from a book that was released a few years ago catches my attention. It has just enough action to keep my attention. I settle in with my feet on the table and popcorn in a bowl beside me.

A presence at my back makes my scalp prickle and my nerves dance with awareness. Only one person pulls that reaction from me.

When he makes no move to enter the room, I turn my head slightly, still watching the movie—the female lead is standing in front of a target and the male lead is throwing knives at her for fucks sake—and say, "You can join me, but don't eat all my popcorn."

"Mighty rich, you telling someone not to eat your food," Kai says as he steps into the room.

I shoot him deadpan look. "I ate your food once."

"That I know about."

He sits at the end of the couch, mirroring my pose and throwing his feet on the table.

I figure he'd move closer, but when he settles in on his side of the couch, I shrug and focus on the television.

The movie is better than I thought it would be. The female lead has to figure out her life after leaving the family she grew up with. She falls in with the more carefree and wild faction of her society and must break free of the rigid upbringing she was raised in. I'm even feeling the romance aspect of the movie, since it's not heavy handed.

About an hour into the movie, my head finds its way into Kai's lap and he's running his fingers through my hair. I'm not sure how it happened since I don't remember moving. One minute I was leaning back on the

couch, shoveling popcorn in my mouth, the next, my eyes are drooping from how good his fingers feel dragging across my scalp.

It's been years since someone has played with my hair. The women and men I fucked never stayed long enough for my cum to dry on them to get this close to me. The last person to rub my scalp was my mother. This feels good, familiar.

Kai makes a noise in his throat that has my eyes snapping open. The female lead and her love interest are climbing a Ferris wheel for reasons I have no clue about since I was dozing off. "What is it?" I ask. "Afraid of heights?"

He shakes his head. "No. It just looks fun."

"Climbing a Ferris wheel? Okay, daredevil."

Kai chuckles and pulls at the strands of my hair, turning my head to face him. The sting against my scalp feels good. He sees the heat flare in my eyes when I meet his gaze, since his eyes go half lidded. "No," he says in a semi normal voice. "The Ferris wheel. It looks like fun."

"You've never been on a Ferris wheel?" I ask incredulously.

Kai looks at me as I sit up, almost like he thinks *I'll* think he's broken. "Well, no. Pop said shit like that was frivolous, that we needed to focus on business. He said...only queer kids want to do soft, pansy shit like that."

I swear to fucking god if it's the last thing I do, I'll fucking kill Charlie. I mean, I get it. This business isn't for the weak or taking fucking vacations every other month. But going on Ferris wheels makes him soft? I went on Ferris wheels to impress girls and finger fuck them on the cars while we were high in the sky. Ain't nothing about that being for queer kids.

I keep that tidbit to myself. He might try to deny it, but Kai is just as obsessed with me as I am with him. If I told him about any girls I used to fuck, I'm sure he'd track them down and slit their throats with one of those knives he so adept at using.

"I've been on a Ferris wheel plenty of times," I say, pointing to my chest, "and there's nothing soft about me."

Kai looks miserable for a second, then a mask drops over his face and he quirks his lips in a half smirk. "I don't know, Carter. Your lips are kinda soft."

I give him a dry look, but I allow him to drop the subject. It's probably one of those things he doesn't talk about to anyone. I'll respect it for now. But he'll have to tell me why he didn't just go on his own. I saw him out

and about with his weird ass friends on multiple occasions. He could have gone, and Charlie would have been none the wiser.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," I tell him, though my lips do twitch.

"What?" he asks too innocently. "I was just saying. You said there's nothing soft and I proved you wrong. Although," he pulls me over until I'm stretched on top of him and his hands come down on my ass, squeezing my cheeks hard, "this is pretty soft too."

My cock hardens as I settle between his legs. "Not here though." I roll my hips so he can feel my rigid length.

The fact that he's using his body to pull me away from the conversation isn't lost on me. But he's warm and solid and fucking *scorching* under me. Looking down at his gorgeous face, I can't wipe away the way he looks at me with such wide, trusting eyes with talk of shit Charlie put him through. I won't. We have the rest of our lives to talk about his asshole of a father. Right now, it's me and him. Our time. Charlie isn't welcome here.

A soft breath leaves his lips and drifts across my face. "No, not there."

Threading my fingers through his hair, I pull him up to meet my lips, kissing away his bad memories. Kai responds enthusiastically, opening for me immediately. He sucks on my tongue, moaning as he takes my taste into him.

I reach down, sliding my hand under his shirt, touching his hard abs and firm pecs. When I get to his left nipple, I tweak the flesh until it becomes a hard bud under my fingers. Kai gasps, pushing his hips up to meet my rockhard erection for friction. I press harder into him, giving him what he wants.

Snatching my lips away, I tip his head to the side and kiss and lick and suck at the skin of his neck. I revel in how Kai's hands grip at my back, holding on tight as he moans in my ear.

The noises he makes. Fuck me, they're hot as fuck. So uninhibited, so loud, so fucking *needy*. His panting breaths spur me on and I attack his neck with fervor, leaving all kinds of marks on him. My fingers flick at his nipple, twisting it between my thumb and forefinger.

Kai curses, dragging his hands under my shirt and clasping at my back. "Carter, please. Fuck me."

I chuckle against his neck and he shivers. "Let me taste you first, Kai. You want me to taste you, right, pretty baby?"

"Anything you want." His voice has dropped an octave, rolling over me like a wave. "Just please."

God, I love the way he begs. He's not used to giving up that control, but he relinquishes it to me readily. Since we started to be more intimate, he's been showing me a side of him I didn't think existed. He submits to me, trusting me with his pleasure. And I'll give him everything he needs.

I pull his shirt over his head, then sit back on my heels to admire his body. Kai is fucking jacked. He's wide in the shoulders and his abs are prominent. He only has a few tattoos—nothing like how I'm decorated—and I can't wait until I put my name on him. Marking him as mine permanently.

With soft fingers, I trail them up his abs, watching them twitch under my touch. Kai's lips part, taking greedy pulls of air as he tracks the movement of my fingers. I want to touch and taste him everywhere, but my eyes are on the prize in his pants. His cock jumps and a small wet spot appears on his pajama pants.

Not able to wait a moment longer, I drop my hand and hook my fingers into his pants, dragging them off him. I thank my lucky stars that Kai doesn't have underwear on, so I have nothing else to pull off as I lower myself in front of him and pump him once, twice, three times. The skin of his uncut cock moves back and forth, the head of his dick peeking out with every down stroke. He looks fucking delicious.

"You just gonna stare," he asks in a voice that already sounds fucked out, "or are you going to taste me?"

I smile up at him, then try to swallow his cock whole. Kai isn't small. So when he bucks up into my mouth with a hiss, I gag around him. Eyes watering, I pull away to catch my breath.

The smug grin on his face makes my chest feel warm and tingly in a way it's never has before. "You don't know how long I've wanted to do that."

"Thought about fucking my face a lot, St. Clair?" I ask, lapping at his cockhead. "Must have been living rent free in your head for years."

"Just to shut you up. I figured you'd be a good cocksucker, with those pouty lips." He hisses when I swallow him again, careful not to deep throat him. "Fuck, just like that. Suck me harder, babe."

I do what he says while my mind is going million miles a minute.

Babe? Does he even realize he called me a pet name? Will it be common, like how I call him my pretty baby? God, I hope so. I love that Kai is dropping his guard for me.

Only for me.

His fingers in my hair are hard, pushing me up and down on his cock. I gag, but I don't stop sucking on him. My spit coats his cock and balls, making a mess out of him, but neither I nor Kai minds. In fact, it helps when I drag my finger down to his asshole and push a finger inside. Kai groans, cursing loudly as I fuck him with one finger then two. I curl my fingers when I deep throat him, pushing my hips into the couch when his hole clenches around my digits.

Popping off his cock, I suck his balls into my mouth, wetting them up more. Kai's legs tremble as I push them up to his chest.

When I pull my fingers from his hole, I lower myself further and clamp my lips around his opening. "Fucking dammit," Kai cries out. I smile against his ass, then suck at him, swallowing down his taste.

I feast on Kai's ass, flicking my tongue around the puckered edges. His hole spasms against my tongue when I push it inside him. Spearing my tongue, I fuck him with it, driving him wild while I tug on his cock.

"Carter," he pants, holding my head in both hands and rotating his hips into my face. "I'm going to come. Make me come with your tongue, babe."

With pleasure. I double my efforts, licking and sucking at him with abandon. I raise my hand and flick my fingers across his right nipple, making it as hard as I made the left.

Flattening my tongue, I drag it across his hole over and over. When next I clasp my lips around his opening, Kai starts to tremble. A strangled sound leaves his throat and his hole flutters against my tongue as he comes. I peek up at him, watching his dick kicking off hands free, making a mess of himself. I spread my hand over his belly as I lick him through his release, rubbing in the cum that's sprayed on his abs.

His heavy pants fill the air as I pull away from his tasty pucker. I watch as he struggles to look at me through sex drunk eyes. Climbing off the couch, I strip out of my clothes and sit back down. Kai yelps when I pull him up and set him on my lap, his back to me.

"Ride me, pretty baby."

He looks at me over his shoulder, a lazy grin across his lips. "You're gonna make me do all the work?"

I laugh as I arrange him until his wet ass is over my cock. "I just did all the work." I touch his belly, still stained with his release. "Here's your proof." Then I stuff two fingers into his mouth, feeding him his release. Kai sucks at them, swallowing down his pleasure.

With a growl, I line up to his hole and slide home, all the way to the hilt. Kai throws his head back, groaning loudly. The soft waves of his hair tickle my face.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I hold him close as he raises and lowers himself on my dick. With my head between his shoulder blades, I breathe in deeply, trapping his scent into my lungs. I love the way he smells, like skin, rum and a scent that only belongs to Kai. I could get high off his smell.

His thighs flex against mine as he grinds on me. I lick a strip up his back as his tight hole strangles my cock every time he lowers himself.

"You ride me so good, pretty baby," I murmur into the skin of his back. "Make me feel so good. Work this ass on my dick."

Kai whimpers then turns to me, taking my mouth in a hard and messy kiss. I grip his chin, keeping our lips locked as I thrust up into him. When I peg that special spot inside him, Kai moans into my mouth, deepening the kiss and working his hole over me like a man possessed.

I grab his hard cock and jerk him, enjoying how he feels in my hand, hot, slick, and stiff.

He snatches his mouth away and presses his forehead to mine. "Oh, god, Carter."

"Yeah, pretty baby. Feels good, don't it?"

"So fucking good. How do you know me so well?"

I grin and kiss him again, tasting the pleasure on his tongue. "Because you belong to me."

Kai shudders and blows his load again, his moans seeping into me, lighting me up and sends my own orgasm rocketing to the surface. I hold him tight and kiss him as I shoot my load deep into his ass. My groan flows through him and Kai gives me one in return. My arms tighten around him, keeping him close as I come and come in waves.

He sighs against my lips when I stop thrusting into him. "I'm a mess."

Laughing, I kiss him again. "Yeah, you are. I like when you're messy."

Kai stands, my dick slipping out of his hole. I grip his hip with one hand, spread him open with the other and watch my cum leak from him. Seeing his wrecked pink hole, shiny and stretched from my dick, has my length twitching.

Leaning forward, I swipe my tongue over his pucker, licking inside. I collect some of my release and push it back into him with my tongue, wanting it to stay there.

Spinning him around, I pull him back to my lap and kiss him hard, trading my release with him. Kai grips my shoulders, eagerly sucking on my tongue.

He sighs into the kiss, gripping the back of my head so he can get all of my taste.

"You're trouble," I tell him, nipping at his bottom lip.

No one has ever left me so sexually fulfilled before. Everything I want, everything I *crave*, Kai possesses. His hot body, his tight ass, his easy submission, his big dick. He has it all.

"I could say the same about you," he replies breathily. "Let's get in the shower. Cum is drying on me and it's uncomfortable."

He stands again and I slap his ass. "You go ahead. I have to make a call, then I'll join you." I see the distrust in his eyes, and I try not to let it sting. We've spent more time not trusting each other than we did trying to work at our relationship. "I won't be long."

Kai folds his lips in but doesn't voice any concerns. He puts his clothes on and walks out of the room. I watch him leave, then pull out my phone and call my dad's right-hand man. I don't know how, but since I was a kid, he's been able to get his hands on just about anything, no matter how outlandish. Maybe he'll be able to help me with my...project.

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CHAPTER 17



KAI

arter needing to make a phone call right after we fucked rubbed me the wrong way, but I didn't ask him about it. If we're going to make this relationship work, I need to learn to trust him. But trust doesn't come easily. The Whitlock family has done nothing to earn my trust. Not yet anyway.

Over the next few days, I catch Carter grinning softly at me when he doesn't think I notice. It makes my chest feel tight for reasons I can't name. Something about him and the way he looks at me fills me to the brim with an indescribable emotion, one I can't pinpoint because I've never felt it before.

We've gotten closer, talking and cooking together. He even joins me in the gym sometimes. A little while ago, he told me his dad taught him and Declan some hand-to-hand stuff. Charlie always had me scrapping but never provided any formal fighting training. As Carter knows, I can hold my own in a fight, but I want more training. He agreed to help me out and we decide to hit the gym a few times a week.

Today is not one of those days, though I wish it was. Pop and Dominic want to have lunch with us to talk about how we're going to proceed, even though we don't know which family is threatening us.

We all know it's a risk to be out so publicly when we don't know where an attack will come from, but Pop and Dominic took precautions. Men from both the Whitlock and St. Clair family are dotted at tables all around the restaurant we're meeting at, as well as parked outside in the parking lot and one across the street. There are a few guards driving around, doing patrol in case someone wants to pull a drive by. We're as covered as we can be.

After we peruse the menu and place our orders, Dominic clasps his hands on the table and looks at me and Carter in turn. "How's everything going? Business going good?" That last question is aimed at me.

A smile twitches at my lip, but I don't dare let it bloom with Pop at the table. He'll have something to say about me liking someone asking me questions about my first business that I built from the ground up.

Most people think Pop financed St. Clair Construction, since it has his name on it, but I worked for it. I took jobs doing hits so I could get the capital for a loan and started it up. I was able to pay off my business loan in the first year from both the contracts I received as well as more hits I did. No one knew it was me that carried them out but Nico.

Knowing he had nothing to do with the success or failure of my company boggles my mind on why he's so adamant about bad mouthing it. But at this point, I no longer care. It's just making me miserable trying to figure out the whys of Charles St. Clair.

Pop raises his eyebrow at me, waiting for me to answer. It's hard to forget how much I want to impress him, but I push it down to answer my father-in-law. "Good. Got something new coming down the pipeline that Carter is helping me with." I glance over at my husband and wink at him. Carter rolls his eyes, but a smile spreads across his face.

Pop scoffs, shaking his head. "Can't believe you're not bothered by this queer shit. It turns my stomach."

Dominic's face turns thunderous. I see what others saw right before he put a bullet in their brains. I'm almost afraid for Pop's life. "For as long as you're in my fucking presence, you won't talk shit about my son. I've about had it with your bullshit. We're trying to save both our families, but that don't come with a lifetime warranty in disrespect. Got it?"

After that first dinner we had at Dominic's place, Carter told me he stayed behind to tell his father he was bi. He said Dominic just shrugged and said that's okay and that he loved him no matter what. What I would have given for that to be Pop's response when I told him I was gay.

I raise my hand for Pop to stop whatever retort he's ready to throw at Dominic. "That's enough. Pop, you're the one that fucking agreed to this marriage. Don't give us shit because we're trying to get along, so we won't be fucking miserable."

He curls his lip but doesn't say anything.

It dawns on me then that that's exactly what he was banking on. He thought if I was to marry a man, it should be one that I fucking loathed, so I wouldn't know happiness. If there's one thing Pop hates, it's for me to show any happiness or joy about anything. Any time I've had a hobby or expressed interest in anything, no matter how small, he'd talk down about it until I didn't show interest anymore. Pop thought being with Carter would guarantee me a lifetime of misery. I inwardly gloat that his plan went awry.

A few beats of silence pass before Dominic starts talking again. "Charlie and I have been talking." He sounds like he wanted to do anything but talk to Pop. "You've been married a few months and shit is quiet. But it ain't gonna stay that way for long. Now is the time for us to step aside and let you two step into our roles. This war that's going to go down—and trust me, it will go down—it's for the young. For those that have fresh minds that can outthink the opposition."

Pop picks up the thread of conversation. "Back in our day, none of this sneaky shit happened. If you wanted war, you shot first and made your demands later. Whoever is behind this is playing a different game than what we're used to."

Carter leans forward, his face expressing shock, much like how I feel. "You both are done?" He snaps his fingers. "Just like that?"

Shaking his head, Dominic looks at his son, suddenly looking older and more exhausted than I've ever seen him. "It's time, son. I was around your age when I took over for your grandpa. It's time to hand the reins over to you and Kaison. This war will have many casualties. It's best if the old guys don't get in the way and become collateral damage."

If anyone else had proposed leaving as head of their families in the middle of a war, I'd think they were afraid of dying or of being killed because of it. But I can see the indecision in Dominic's eyes, even though he says it's what he wants.

Pop looks positively livid about it, so they must have had this conversation for months before they agreed. It's apparent he wanted to continue running this family for as long as he had breath in his lungs. But it wouldn't make sense if Carter was heading the Whitlock family and someone that's not his husband was in charge of the St. Clair family. It would make both families look weak. Pop must have come to that conclusion too, which is why he's not too happy.

Carter and I exchange looks. I've been ready to step into Pop's shoes since I was eighteen. That's one thing he excelled at when I was a child—grooming me to take over the family business and continue the St. Clair legacy. I've been learning on my own since I came of age. I'm more than ready to keep the St. Clair family going.

"You'll make your first appearance as a couple and the heirs of the Whitlock and St. Clair families at the annual Salsey Charity Ball Charlie and I usually go to," Dominic says.

"We'll allow you two to make your own connections and donate in our names. In the *family* names," Pop amends.

Blowing out a pent-up breath, I look at Pop and say, "I won't disappoint you."

"I'll believe it when I see it, Kaison." His voice lacks conviction. I try not to let it sting, but it's hard not to. Carter's face takes on a dark quality as he stares Pop down, but I place my hand on his thigh and squeeze, silently telling him to leave it alone.

He glances at me and that stormy expression leaves his face as he smiles at me. Slowly, I return it, delighting in how he completely ignores Pop's string of curses from his expression. "You ready for this, baby?" he asks, voice pitched low.

"With you, yeah." And to further prove to myself that I don't give a shit what Pop thinks of me and my sexuality, I lean over and plant a quick kiss on Carter's lips. Surprise flicks across his face, but he covers it quickly with a soft grin.

Dominic chortles, slapping Pop on the back obnoxiously. "Guess you were right about this working out, huh, St. Clair?" I know that shit burns Pop up, but what can he do? We're already married, and our families will prosper because of it. Just like he wanted.

We keep up appearances, eating and chatting about nothing. Between the three of us, conversation is easy. Pop tries to keep up, but his smiles are forced, and his laughs are too loud to be real. No one who knows him would buy that shit. I know I don't.

As soon as he can, he says he has a meeting and stands up to leave. He shakes our hands and exits as quickly as possible. Several men get up and leave after him.

Since I know we're still covered by Whitlock men and the few St. Clair guys I have with me all the time, Nico included, I stand and follow Pop out.

I feel rather than see Nico following behind me. I can register his presence anywhere.

"Pop. Hold up," I shout, jogging to catch him before he slides in the back seat of his car. The men that are with him spread out around the car, facing the street and alleyways so they can keep an eye out for danger.

He stops with one foot in the car, looking at me impatiently. "What?"

I stop in front of him and stuff my shaky hands in my pocket. I'm not sure what will come of this conversation or if he'll even answer my questions, but I have to try.

"Why did you put Indigo Arc in my name?"

I'm rewarded with Charlie's flash of surprise before he wipes his face of any expression. "How the fuck did you find that out?"

"Doesn't matter how. Tell me. Why did you do it?"

"That's none of your fucking business," he seethes.

I step closer to him, pulling my hands from my pockets and fisting them at my sides. "It is my fucking business since you put it in my name without my fucking knowledge. Why?"

"None of your concern." He tries to get in the car, but I stop him with a hand on his shoulder. "What now?"

I square my shoulders and look him in the eyes. "Since it's *my* casino, in *my name*, I'll be taking over the construction. I'll be rebuilding in the image I set forth. You'll have no say in anything I do from here on out."

"You ungrateful son of a bitch. I wish your mother never dropped you off at my fucking doorstep. You've been an embarrassment to this family for years. I should have given the fucking family over to Henry's son. He's a real man." Henry is dad's right-hand man.

I swallow down the disrespect, my throat tight with hurt. But I don't let it show. I keep my face blank as he goes off on a tirade about me not being able to do anything right, how I'm a disappointment, that a dog could have done a better job than me. I take it all, watching as his face gets more and more red as he really builds himself up.

When he stops to take a breath, I hold my hand up, stopping him from another burst of insults. "Don't give a fuck what you have to say, Pop. You've said enough over the years to last me a lifetime. But hear me and hear me well. The St. Clair's belong to me now. You can keep going with your bullshit, but that doesn't matter to me." A vein throbs in his forehead, but he doesn't speak. So, I keep going. "I will be rebuilding Indigo Arc.

Every other casino or business in your name is none of my concern. But anything that belongs to me will be mine in more than name."

My heart thumps hard against my rib cage. I've never stood up to Pop like that. Most of the time, he shoots me down before it can get this far. But I'm tired. I'm tired of trying to make him happy. Tired of trying to prove to him that I'm worthy. Tired of him talking down to me when he should love me. I'm his *son*. It shouldn't be this hard to show him that I know what the fuck I'm doing.

He slams the door shut and steps into my space. "You threatening me, boy? I'll take this fucking family back and continue to run it. This war—"

"This war will be lost because I'll divorce Carter and split this fucking alliance apart." He tries to hide it, but Pop's eyes widen a fraction. "I will tank this fucking family and all you worked for will go down the fucking drain." When he just stares at me, I allow a satisfied smile to spread across my face. "I'm more your son than you want to give me credit for. If you fuck with me, Pop, I will let all this shit disappear. The war will be lost because of you."

I step back, keeping my eyes on him, then turn around and walk away. His angry voice reaches my ears, and I tune most of it out, though some of his words find their target, the insults hitting me like barbs.

It's been a long time coming, me standing up to Pop, but I feel a weight lifted from my shoulder. I'll probably still be a little fucked up from his constant abuse, but I don't have to take it anymore. The St. Clair family is mine. Nothing he says or does can make me change the course of anything I want to do.

Pop no longer has any power over me.

My heart still pounds when I step back into the restaurant, Nico on my heels. "You good?" he asks.

"Where's my husband?" I reply, voice tight. "Where's Carter? Where—"

"I'm right here, baby," I hear from behind me.

I walk straight into his arms, wrapping my arms around his waist for everyone to see. I'm not weak for being with him. I'm not weak or soft for being gay. I'm not weak for falling for my husband.

With his arms around me, he makes me feel strong. He makes me feel like I'm worth something. He makes me feel whole.

I can't tell him that right now, but I will. When the time is right, I'll tell him how I feel and everything he's done for me. But right now, I want to breathe in his scent, trap it in my lungs and use it as fuel to go forward.

The shackles Pop had on me to make me hate myself are off. They're gone. It's up to me to make sure they *stay* gone. With Carter by my side, I can do anything.

He pulls me away, framing my face. "You okay?"

"Better now."

Carter searches my eyes, trying to read me. I'm not sure what he sees, but his lips tip up into that crooked smile that I love so much. "Dad said our guys are assembled at that abandoned casino by the pier that he bought ages ago. He wants us to make an announcement that we're the new heads of the family. We have to make some changes, baby. Our men, together, intermingled. That's the only way this will work."

"Okay. Let's talk about it on the ride over." Carter nods and motions for Gavin. Nico is already beside me, awaiting my orders. "Both of you will ride with us. We'll need your ideas too." Our right hands look at each other with skepticism, but they nod.

We all pile into our cars, the men that came with us following close behind. All of our eyes are peeled, making sure we're not attacked like Carter was when he went to do his deal with the Dominicans. Since we're within city limits, I figure we're safe, but I make sure no one around him tries anything.

Thirty minutes later, we're all pulling up to the warehouse, but from different directions. It was Carter's idea not to drive in the same direction together, for fear that one of our cars would be intercepted.

We quickly make our way inside where most of our families are assembled. Neither Pop nor Dominic are there, leaving us to run the show and make the rules. Going forward, there will be some changes made, but they'll only strengthen both families. Anyone that doesn't like them can walk.

We both stand in front of our men, looking at them. Some of my guys look openly hostile towards Carter's and vice versa. We need to be integrated to be as strong as we should be.

Stepping forward, I raise my voice so all can hear me. "Starting today, Carter and I are heads of the St. Clair-Whitlock families. Pop and Dominic have stepped down." There's some stirring in the crowd, but no one speaks

out of turn. "There will be some changes. For starters, guard duties for our homes will be a combination of Whitlocks and St. Clair's. You have to learn to work together so none of us end up with a bullet in our heads." That gets some shouting from those in the crowd, but Declan steps forward and whistles, silencing everyone.

Carter stands beside me, his shoulder brushing against mine. "This isn't up for fucking debate. If you don't like it, there's the fucking door." His voice drops to a menacing tone. A shiver that I fight to suppress washes over me. "But if you leave, whether you're a Whitlock or a St. Clair, you'll be our enemy and we'll fucking hunt you down like the disloyal dogs you are."

Everyone keeps their positions. They don't look happy about the turn of events, but they know better than to cross either of us. Both our reputations proceed us, as well as Declan's, who is a fucking menace. If anyone messes with his brother or anything he has going on, Declan will fucking cap them.

Silence stretches as we wait for anyone to break ranks. When they don't, I continue. "This war isn't proceeding with any speed, so we need to be fucking vigilant. Carter and I will be working on figuring out who the bastards after us are. In the meantime, don't do anything stupid. It'll only fuck us up. Hear this and hear it well. Disobeying anything we say will have you signing your own death warrant. My men know me, but everyone else, don't think I'm bluffing. I've killed men for less." I pause for effect. "Do not fucking move until we say move. We give the orders. No one will be a fucking cowboy, got it?"

"Any questions?" Carter asks. No one speaks. "Declan will be in charge of security. He—"

One of Carter's men, an older guy that probably worked under Dominic for ages, steps forward, looking like an angry bull, his face a puce shade. "I ain't gonna listen to the younger Whitlock when the older one ain't proved to be an effective leader. Now, I say—"

Whatever he wants to say is cut off by Declan's gun discharging, hitting the man in the center of his forehead. He crumples to the floor, blood pooling around his head. Declan looks calm, as if he just came from a relaxing walk.

"If anyone else has something to say, speak now or forever hold your peace," Declan says, holding his still smoking gun at his side. Some of the Whitlock men look unhappy, but the display of not showing favoritism seems to have endeared Declan to my guys, at least for right now.

Carter rolls his eyes. "You and you," he says, pointing to some lower-level men of his, "clean this up. And send his wife a dozen roses."

When the body is moved away, I look around at everyone assembled. "Anymore questions?" No one speaks so I say, "For now, your directions are to keep your eyes open, but don't get in our fucking way. This is your only warning."

With that, we break down the new rules for the new regime of the St. Clair-Whitlock family.

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CHAPTER 18



KAI

week after we blended our families against our wills I'm startled awake by my ringing phone. I grab it blindly and look at the number. It's unknown. I think about letting it roll into voicemail, but many people I do business with don't have listed numbers.

Carter pulls his arm from around my waist and sits up, rubbing his eyes. He looks adorably rumpled, his hair all over his head and lines on his face from his pillow. His curious glance flashes in the low moon.

"Who's calling at this hour?" He picks up his phone from the nightstand on his side of the bed and groans. "It's three in the morning."

"No clue." I show him the phone just as it stops ringing. But it starts up again almost immediately. "Whoever they are, they're fucking persistent."

Carter growls in frustration and throws the blanket from his legs. I watch his naked ass flex as he pads to the bathroom. Since we're up, I wouldn't mind feeling his dick inside me again. He fucked me thoroughly before we went to sleep, but I'm always up for another round.

Hoping to get the mystery caller off the line quickly so my husband can dick me down, I answer with an annoyed, "This better be fucking good."

A pause. Then a voice I didn't think I'd hear since he's been ducking my calls for a meeting. "Good morning, Kaison St. Clair. We need to meet," the head of the Petrov family, Vlad, says in his smooth accented voice.

I sit up straighter, shock rocketing through me. The Russians and Fensters have been avoiding our calls and requests to meet for the past few months. I'd given up having a halfway civil conversation with either of them, figuring we'd solve whatever issues we had with our guns.

"Vlad," is all I say. I reach into my nightstand and pull out my gun and sheath with my knife. Then I walk over to the closet I now share with Carter and start pulling down clothes for both of us.

Since I got my concussion and spent a week in here, I haven't slept in my room. Slowly, I started bringing my clothes here, and now I have my side of the closet, as well as a few drawers in his dresser.

"There has been...a wrong done to me by your family. You need to make it right."

"The fuck are you talking about?" I ask, sliding on my pants. Carter comes out of the bathroom, and I put the phone on speaker and toss it on the bed while I finish getting dressed.

"Not over the phone," Vlad growls.

"Line is secure," Carter says, an edge to his tone that would make a lesser man piss himself. "What's the issue?"

Vlad pauses again. "Whitlock. Since you both are here, allow me to tell you what a cocksucker in your organization did." I bristle but allow him to speak. "They kidnapped a boy from my old neighborhood. No more than eighteen. Tortured him for information about this war someone wants with you. He knew nothing but was killed anyway. His body was left on his mother's doorstep with a dozen roses. I know that is your calling card. I would like answers for this."

Carter and I look at each other, anger flashing across his face. We told everyone to stand down so we could figure this shit out. So we wouldn't be getting fucking phone calls like this at fucking three in the morning.

Asking the question that's been running through my mind, Carter asks, "Why call instead of seeking revenge? I know your family doesn't take too kindly to shit like this."

"We can talk when we are alone. I do not trust this open line." Carter shakes his head and finishes getting dressed.

"No offense, Vlad"—full offense to Vlad— "but we don't trust you. One of our guys killed one of yours. What's to say you won't try to get revenge when we're alone?"

"Here is what I propose. You pick the time and location and bring as many men as you would like. I will bring my son and only my son. As you know, he is an only child. If we both die, the Petrov family will fall. I have no intentions of dying, so I will not cross you."

We stare at each other, having a silent conversation. It's a good compromise. We can have the meeting on our time and at whatever location we like, leaving Vlad at a disadvantage. If he tries to backdoor us, there will be St. Clair and Whitlock men there to cut them both down. And we'd have one less family to worry about.

Carter nods once and I agree. "Okay, Vlad. Give us some time to find the sonofabitch that did this, and we'll give you a call back."

"I'll reach out to you, Kaison. In, say, forty-eight hours?"

"Forty-eight hours," I repeat, and he hangs up.

Taking deep breaths that do nothing to calm my rising temper, I growl, "Who. The fuck. Disobeyed our orders?"

"No fucking idea," he says, strapping a knife to his belt loop and holstering his gun at his back, "but whoever it is will regret that they were ever born."

I don't like repeating myself. I also don't like motherfuckers not listening when I say shit. The person or people involved in killing the Russian kid will die screaming.

"Call everyone," I say over my shoulder as I step into the hallway to wake Nico up. "I want to get to the bottom of this shit today."

I bang on Nico's door, my temper still flaring. It's not often I get called in the middle of the night for some bullshit. That's usually Pop's area.

That pulls me up short. No, it's not Pop's anymore. It's me. I'm the leader of the St. Clair family now. Any decisions going forward will be mine and Carter's.

Pop probably gave Vlad my number. They have a contentious relationship, so it makes sense that he would have Pop's number. And with Pop not speaking to me, why not give the Russian my number so he could call me himself?

Irritation flows through my veins, but I tamp it down. It's not time to think about Pop right now. Right now, I need to focus on the pieces of shit that feel like they don't have to follow my fucking orders.

Nico answers his bedroom door, gun in hand. "What happened?"

"Russians called. Someone killed a Russian kid. We gotta figure out who."

All traces of sleepiness leave his eyes. "Give me ten minutes to get dressed."



Two days later, Vlad and his son Alexei stand in the basement of The Fox Club, surrounded by twenty of my men and twenty of Carter's. Upstairs, twenty more men sit around and guard the club in case the Russians cross us.

Hanging from my favorite hook is the man that green lit the operation to kidnap the first Russian they came across in Russian territory to get information about the war. The other three men involved are piled in the corner, bullets in their heads and chests. Their families get a dozen roses, but they will not be given a funeral. They'll be taken to one of the St. Clair funeral homes and cremated, their names and legacies not to be spoken of again. Their families will also not be compensated for their deaths. They knew the risk when they decided to go against our fucking orders—unless they had money saved up for a rainy day for their families, they'll be out in the cold. They'll only have their wayward fucking fathers or husbands to blame.

Me, Vlad, and Carter stand close to the man that is begging for his life. Blood spills from his mouth and wounds all over his body. He smells like piss and shit, having been left to hang from the hook for close to thirty hours. He hasn't suffocated from his position, but he's not long for this world.

"I was...just...trying to...help," he says pitifully, trying to open swollen eyes.

To my pleasure, I got to watch Carter work this time. I can tell he was trained in fighting, his punches and knees landing in places that are meant to cause maximum harm. He allowed Mack, the man hanging, to defend himself, but it was like a professional boxer fighting a priest—it was a no contest.

Watching him work was so hot that I blew him after we strung Mack up, swallowing his load with relish before we went to find the other men that

Mack told us were involved. Carter fucked my face like he hated me, and I was in fucking heaven.

Carter slaps Mack across the face almost lazily, but Mack still cries out in pain. "We fucking said to stand down. *You* decided you didn't want to *follow fucking orders*," he growls. "Tell Vlad what you told us."

Mack peeks over at Vlad, a large, strained breath leaving his chest. "Kid said...you weren't...involved."

"He was right," Vlad says in an almost bored tone. "You snatched someone on my territory. That will not fly with me, my friend."

"Not...your friend," Mack manages to snark, even in the position he's in.

I glare at him. "Now ain't the time for your smart fucking mouth." I pull my blade from behind my back and flick it over to Vlad. "You can get your revenge, then we're square."

Vlad takes the blade and twists it in his fingers. "Beautiful blade."

"It's my favorite," I say dryly.

He looks up at me. "I want compensation for the youth's family. Five million should do it."

"Done," Carter and I say together.

Vlad nods and looks back at the knife in admiration. "He was not a part of my family. If he were, I would not rest until everyone responsible was killed, including you two."

"Watch it," Carter threatens.

Vlad continues talking as if Carter didn't say anything. "But he was a reckless kid. I have no doubt he said something to make himself a target. It was not the first time we have had to come to his rescue." He meets our eyes in turn. "His family will not seek revenge. They will take the money given and leave the area. As will we."

He turns suddenly and swipes the knife across Mack's throat. Blood splashes on the three of us, but none of us make a move to avoid the spray. Mack thrashes around, his eyes wide with panic. He got what he fucking deserved.

After Mack goes still and his eyes close with his death, I send the men at our backs upstairs. Now that the deed is done, we need to talk to Vlad alone. There is no other entrance down here that Vlad can see, so he won't try anything, for fear that he won't get out of The Fox Club alive.

Once we're alone, Vlad wipes the blade on Mack's tattered shirt and hands it back to me. "Thank you for making this right."

Carter dips his head. "I'll transfer the five million to whatever account you want."

He nods and walks around the body, looking over Carter's and my handiwork. "I was not jesting when I said we will leave. Our family has found new territory in Delaware that is a good market to tap into. Alexei has been operating there for a few months. After your war is over, we will leave."

"Why not before?"

"Absences breed vacuums. During a war, your family or whoever is after you cannot bridge that gap. It will bring more people and more trouble."

I can't deny his logic.

If he leaves now, his territory will be up for grabs. We'd be worried about a family after us, as well as whoever heard that the Russian territory was vacant. It would bring a shit storm down on our slice of Jersey and have bodies dropping faster than the morgues can process them.

"I tell you this," he continues, "so you know that we have nothing to do with your family's troubles. If there is war, the Petrovs are not involved. We are packing up shop now to make our move. We don't have much, as the Fensters, Reyes and now St. Clair-Whitlock family has everything tied up. We have more in Delaware with less trouble."

He steps around Mack and holds out his hand. "My family is tired of war. We want to live and retire and take gambler's money."

I shake his hand and Carter clasps it in turn. "You want us to walk you out?"

Vlad smiles sharply at us. "We can handle it. If your men are not as dishonorable as these, we will leave safely."

We shake Alexei's hand as well and they trot up the stairs. Manuel and a few other men from both the Whitlock and St. Clair family come to retrieve the bodies and clean up.

I turn to Carter with a raised eyebrow. "Do you believe him?"

He nods. "He stepped into the lion's den with no back up. If he was involved, that's a risk that might not have paid off."

"And you believe the Dominicans." Not phrased as a question, but Carter answers anyway. "Yeah. They're familiar with how war can hurt their family and they're not eager to jump into it with a family larger than theirs. That leaves the Fensters."

"The fucking Fensters." I had my suspicions when we were eliminating families. They're the only family that could even hope to match ours in strength and size. The head of the family is also cunning. He wouldn't come at us guns blazing. He would try to destabilize us, try to get us off center so they can come in and attack while we're confused and disoriented.

What he didn't count on was me and Carter getting married and actually working well together. He didn't expect us to band together to try to root them out. He probably didn't expect us to reach out to other families for answers. It's something he wouldn't do, so it's inconceivable to trust the word of another man.

As the men pass by with the bodies of the dead, I think about how much this will be in our future. There will be plenty of men dead, both ours and the Fensters. It's the reality of war, and I don't relish that so many of our guys will find their way to the grave.

Carter breaks the silence. "We'll get with Declan about extra security. He should have men assembled into a patrol that will keep this family safe. Then we go on the offensive."

I smile. I live for the offensive.

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CHAPTER 19



CARTER AND KAI



"Where are we going?" Kai asks, touching the blindfold over his eyes lightly.

I slap his hand away, making him scowl in the direction he thinks I'm in. "Don't worry about it. Leave the blindfold alone or you'll ruin the surprise."

He grumbles under his breath but lowers his hand.

I've been working on this surprise for a few weeks now. We probably won't get time in the coming weeks to get away, as this war heats up.

No matter where we look, we can't find any of the Fensters. It's like everyone went underground. Our families have been searching the streets, looking for even a glimpse of Anthony Fenster and his son, Sam and daughter Gabbi, but nothing. Word is, both Sam and Gabbi have a thing for rocket launchers and the chaos they bring. It's safe to assume that one or both of them was involved in killing my guys, blowing up my money and almost killing me. When I see those two fuckers, they're mine.

Tonight, though, I won't think about the war. My mind is firmly on what I plan to do tonight with my husband.

I picked Kai up from work, grabbing us a quick meal since we had to drive two hours out of town to get to where I set up his surprise.

When we got about twenty minutes out, I tied a blindfold around his eyes, not wanting him to see before I pulled him out of the car.

Ten of our men are already there waiting and the car in front of us and behind us are full of men with guns and bad attitudes. I splurged on bulletproof SUVs with blacked out windows to give us some added protection while we waited for the Fensters to be dispatched.

When I see the lights up ahead, I smile. I slide closer to Kai and take his chin gently in my hands. "Do you trust me?"

"Yeah," he answers without hesitation. "I wouldn't have let you blindfold me if I didn't."

I plant a quick kiss on his lips, smiling into the kiss when Kai threads his fingers at my nape.

With a chuckle, I pull away and untangle his hands from my hair. "We have plenty of time for that." The car stops and I undo his seatbelt. "Take my hands and I'll help you out."

He grabs my hands in a firm grip and allows me to help him out of the car. Confusion crosses his face when he feels rocks under his feet.

This is one of the first times I've seen him dressed down. Both of us have on a pair of jeans, a plain t-shirt—mine black and Kai's blue—and sneakers. He looks really good like this. Relaxed. Younger. Carefree.

Smiling, I pull him away from the car and stand behind him, my chin on his shoulder. "Ready?"

"Yes." I hear the trepidation in his tone, but he's bouncing on his heels, so I know he's excited. He tilts his head when he hears the music playing in front of us, and I know he can't place it.

My heart knocking in my chest, I pull the blindfold off and step to the side so I can see his expression.

Kai's eyes show confusion, then they light up, a wide smile spreading across his face.

The light from the concession stands, the games, and most importantly, the Ferris wheel brighten up the night. The music from the carousel breaks the silence of the evening. The smell of fair food fills the air with the scent of popcorn, funnel cake and deep fried everything.

It's way too much for just the two of us, but Kai deserves to have this experience. My chest lights up with happiness when I see his face. It was well worth it to keep this secret from him.

After we watched the movie together and he rode me like a fucking bucking bronco, I made a call to figure out how to get a fair for Kai. It wasn't cheap, but it was worth every penny.

"Carter," he breathes as he continues to look at the fair set up. "When did you...how?"

With a grin on my face, I put my arm around him and kiss his temple. "I have my ways. Come on, let's go have some fun."

Matching his smile, I lead Kai through the gates of the fair. Our guards are walking around, but they stay out of our way.

It's not a full fair set up since that would have required me finding a full staff. We have some of the fair games like knock down, balloon pop, ring toss and duck shoot. Along with those, we have bumper cars, the carousel, that giant danger slide, and the Ferris wheel. For food, we have funnel cakes, hot dogs, cotton candy, candied apples, and caramel popcorn.

All in all, we have everything we need to give Kai a piece of his missing childhood.

He threads our fingers together and pulls me towards the bumper cars. "Get in, Whitlock." He looks over his shoulder at me with an excited grin. "Let me show you how it's done." He claims one of the cars further from the entrance.

"Oh, you're talking big shit," I say, sliding into my bumper car. My legs are a little too long for this to be really comfortable, but I'll squish into the tiny car for him.

Kai looks like he's going to spill over the side with his bulk, but his legs fit fine.

After the ride operator makes sure we're inside, she starts the ride up. Immediately, Kai guns it towards me, bumping my car hard. His loud laughter sends that unfamiliar feeling down my spine. A feeling I've had for weeks but can't manage to pinpoint. Whatever it is, I like it. A lot.

"You're going to regret that," I threaten, then take off behind him.

We stay on the bumper cars for many long minutes, ramming each other and laughing like children.

Once he's had his fill of that, we take the giant slide of death down about a hundred times. Every time, Kai gets up with a bright smile, then goes back to the top for another round. I hate this fucking slide, but if it makes him this happy, I'll suck it up for him and slide down over and over.

He opts to skip the carousel and go straight to the games. We start out at ring toss. Neither of us win, but we have a great time tossing the rings around the jars. We don't even get one seated properly. I'm sure if we weren't here for fun, Kai would have stabbed the guy for running a rigged game.

"I got this," I tell him when we get to duck shoot. Kai is great with his gun, but I'm a fucking marksman. "I'll win you a bear. Which one?"

Giving me a deadpan look, he points to a large purple dragon. I blow him a kiss and shoot down the three ducks I have to so I can earn my prize.

The attendant congratulates me and hands me the dragon. I give it to Kai with a kiss to his forehead. He stuffs it under his arm, raising his mouth to mine.

"Let me win you one," he says against my lips.

He drags me over to balloon pop, where they have larger stuffed animals. I point to the biggest one they have. "How many do I have to pop to get that one?" Kai asks the attendant.

"All ten," she says, handing him ten darts. "Good luck, sir."

"Don't need luck when you have skill."

I scoff. The balloons aren't blown up big enough for Kai to hit all ten.

My mouth is hanging open when he throws the last dart, popping the tenth balloon. The attendant looks impressed as well, smiling at the board where all the darts are stuck. "Great job, sir. Here you go." She hands him the oversized teddy bear and he presents it to me with a flourish.

Chuckling, I take it and wrap one arm around it and throw the other arm around his shoulder. "Want some funnel cake? Candied apple? Cotton candy?"

"All three. I've never had any of it."

Grabbing his hand, I pull him to the concession stand and he orders everything he wants. After we get our food, we sit at the table set up by the stand.

Kai looks around, his eyes shining with an emotion I think I can identify, but don't want to call him out on. "This is...Carter, this is amazing. No one has ever done something like this for me."

I take one of his hands and bring it to my lips. "I'll give you anything you want, Kaison."

"Yeah?" he asks with a crooked smile.

I roll my eyes. "Within reason."

The groan that he releases when he bites into his funnel cake goes straight to my dick. "This is so good. Fuck, I've been missing out."

His hand still in mine, I give it a squeeze. "I'll make sure you never miss out again."



Kai

AFTER I TEAR into my funnel cake and drink some of the best lemonade I've ever had, we walk around the grounds, making slow loops to let our food settle before we get on the Ferris wheel.

I bite into the candied apple, loving the contrast of sweet and tangy. Apple juice dribbles down my chin and Carter takes a napkin from his pocket and wipes it before leaning in and licking the rest away. An unbidden laugh bubbles up my throat.

"Tastes good," he murmurs, dropping a kiss on my lips.

He's been doing that a lot lately, kissing me randomly. Doesn't seem to matter where we are and who's around. When he feels like it, Carter kisses me and smiles every time I lean in for more when he pulls away. He knows he has me strung out on his lips.

I polish off the candied apple and get started on the cotton candy. The sweet treat melts on my tongue and I hum. Plucking a piece into my mouth, I stop Carter and stand on my tiptoes. He grins before sliding his tongue into my mouth, collecting the sugar before it dissolves completely.

He doesn't stop immediately, kissing me slowly and thoroughly. I get lightheaded from how he kisses me, but I don't stop him. I simply hold on to his shoulders and allow him to plunder my mouth as he likes.

I'm breathless when he releases my lips, and my cock is straining in my pants.

Stepping away, I continue to walk around the small fair, taking it all in. When Carter said he had a surprise for me, I didn't think it was something like this. The fact that he paid enough attention to me when I told him I never rode a Ferris wheel or went to a fair means more than I could say.

If I wasn't sure before, I'm sure now. I'm in love with Carter. I fell for him gradually. Every little act, every touch, every kiss brought me closer and closer to the precipice. I had no choice but to tip over the edge.

My eyes find the Ferris wheel again. "I want my kids to experience this. I don't want them to have the life I did. No fun, barred from everything that is deemed soft. I want them to know what it's like to see the world from the top of a Ferris wheel."

"You want kids?"

I look up into Carter's blue-green eyes and nod. I've never told anyone I wanted kids. And the way Pop tells it, no one will give a kid to a gay man. But I've wanted to be a father since I can remember. I know I'd do a better job than Pop. I would actually love my kids, like Dominic loves Carter and Declan.

I watch his face as I say, "Yeah. Two. A boy and a girl. Or two boys. Or two girls. Don't really matter. Do you?"

He shrugs. "Never thought about it. Kids are...a lot." I laugh and bump him with my dragon. "What? They are."

"You have enough money to afford a nanny," I tell him dryly.

Carter chuckles and walks behind me, wrapping an arm around my waist. He plants a kiss on the back of my neck. With his lips pressed to my skin, he says, "If you want kids, I'll give you kids."

"I'm a guy," I say sarcastically. "I can't get pregnant."

"Shut it, Kai."

I chuckle, feeling so carefree tonight. I feel like I'm not Kaison St. Clair, head of the St. Clair family. Tonight, I feel like Kai. Just Kai. A random man in the world that's on a date with his husband. His obviously rich husband that fucking buys out fairs so I can ride a Ferris wheel.

We make one more loop and stop in front of the Ferris wheel. "Let's get on," he murmurs against my skin.

Eagerly, I drag him up the few stairs and we climb into the empty pod. The attendant closes the door and Carter gives him a thumbs up. He returns it and turns the Ferris wheel on. It slowly climbs into the sky, the ground getting further and further away.

I can't peel my eyes off the horizon. Everything looks so peaceful as we climb higher in the sky.

When we get to the top, the Ferris wheel stops. I look at Carter with wide eyes, but he simply smiles at me.

"It always stops at the top," he explains softly. "And I asked them to let us have some time up here. So you could see."

A slow smile stretches across my face. "Thank you, Carter." I look back out at the world. "This is wild, being up this high." The air feels cooler up here, the breeze of the night blowing the stray hairs that escaped my ponytail. "What did you do when you came up here? Fucked off with your friends and did dumb shit like rock the pod?"

His dark chuckle has me looking over at him sharply. His eyes have taken on that half-lidded quality I'm starting to become intimately familiar with. He slides off the seat he's on and goes for my pants, undoing the button and sliding down the zipper.

"What are you doing?" I breathe, even though what he's doing is really fucking obvious.

Carter looks up at me with dark eyes, that sexy fucking smirk on his face. "I'm going to show you what I used to do when I was in the Ferris wheel."

"You sucked someone off up here?"

He shakes his head as he pulls my cock from my pants. The cool breeze blows over my cockhead and I fight to hold in a moan. "I got some head up here before. Let me show you how fucking good it felt."

With that, he swallows my cock in one go. A loud moan escapes my lips before I can hold it in. God, Carter's mouth is fucking dangerous. He bobs up and down on my cock, the flat of his tongue dragging against the underside of my dick.

I grip him under the chin, rolling my hips into his mouth. Carter makes those sexy fucking gagging noises, and his mouth gets wetter, his throat spasming more. But he doesn't release the strangle hold he has on my shaft.

"Fuck, babe," I groan, dragging my other hand into his hair. I toss my head back, fucking up into his mouth slowly.

Carter pops off my dick, licking his lips. "Wanna bet I can make you come before we get to the bottom?"

Huffing a laugh, I nod. "I'll take that bet."

Just then, the ride starts up again, moving unhurriedly to the bottom. "I'd better get to work," he murmurs, then sucks me back in.

I hold still, letting Carter draw moans from me. He's so fucking good, using his hand to jerk me as he picks up speed on with his hot throat.

"Hurry, Carter," I taunt, but it's cut off with a moan when he flicks his tongue against the spot under my cockhead.

I grab handfuls of his hair and grip it tight, trying to keep my moans softer since we're closer to the bottom.

The closer we get to the ground, the more my pleasure heightens. Just when I think he won't win the bet, he reaches up and tugs on my balls. I see fucking stars as pleasure licks up my spine and my cock shoots off, coming hard in Carter's mouth.

He swallows quickly, not leaving a mess behind.

Letting my dick slide from his mouth, he quickly tucks me back in my pants and helps me make myself presentable. When he sits beside me, I see some of my cum on the side of his mouth. Using my tongue, I lap it up and shove it into his mouth, exchanging my salty taste with him.

I don't release his mouth until the attendant opens the door of the pod to let us out. Judging from the sly smile he's giving us, I know he's not fooled that we were only making out. Fuck it. I don't care if he knows. That was the best head I've ever gotten in my life.

"Thanks," Carter says with a satisfied smile on his face.

"No problem," he attendant says. "Enjoy your night."

"We plan to," I shoot over my shoulder, and he cracks up.

We collect our stuffed animals, and I wrap my arm around Carter. "This is the best night I've had in ...probably ever. Thank you Carter. It means the world to me."

He stops us and turns me to face him. "I'll do anything for you, Kai. This is only the beginning."

Then he kisses me sweetly, setting my soul on fire.

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CHAPTER 20



CARTER

ou feel so fucking good," I tell Kai as I pound into him. "You gonna come for me, pretty baby? Huh? Gonna let me feel this tight ass squeezing my cock?"

I'll never get enough of Kai's sweet moans as I fuck him, tunneling into his hole. *My* hole.

I move his damp hair to the side and bite along the skin of his neck, leaving my marks behind. He'll wear his hair down for the charity event tonight, but we'll both know they're there. We'll both know I marked him as mine.

My fingers go around to his nipples, tweaking them as the shower water cascades down on us.

We're supposed to be showering so we can get ready for the charity event, but I never look at Kai's round, firm ass and not want to stick my dick in him.

Kai thought the same, turning to the shower walls and spreading his cheeks, showing me his wet and stretched hole. It took me no time to sink into him.

My pretty baby tips his head back against my shoulder, seeking my lips as he pants and moans. I cover his mouth with mine, groaning as my tongue is coated with the flavor that only belongs to Kai.

I drop my hand and grasp his cock, jerking him in time to my thrusts. Kai's moans heighten and he tenses in my arms. His body vibrates against mine just before he sprays his passion all over my hand and the shower wall, mewling into our kiss. I follow closely behind, giving him a groan as I use his hole to milk my cock.

A laugh bubbles up from Kai and I join in, even though I'm not sure what's funny.

"We're supposed to be getting ready for the event," he says through chuckles.

"That's what we're doing. I was coming in here to wash your back."

"Mhm." He pushes me away and I'm sad when my dick leaves the warmth of his entrance. As soon as we get back home, I'm wrapping his legs around my waist and getting as deep into him as I can. "Can you really wash my back so we can get dressed? We don't want to be late."

I grab a new cloth and add body wash and wash his back. When he turns around, I wash the rest of him, paying special attention to his dick. It bobs under my attention, even though Kai gives me a flat look.

"What?" I ask, trying to look innocent. "I want to make sure you're clean."

He scoffs and takes the cloth from me, washing the rest of his body. I do the same, then hand the cloth to Kai so he can get my back. Unlike me, he just washes me, his hands don't travel elsewhere.

Pity.

While I shave, Kai stands next to me and blow dries his hair. The waves curl around his shoulders, covering up the purple bruises I just sucked into his skin. I grin at him in the mirror and Kai makes a show of arranging his hair so the marks are covered. I laugh loudly before pulling him in for a quick kiss.

I'll never get enough of Kai's mouth. He always tastes so sweet and he melts into me like he wants to live in my skin. His hands are always eager when they loop around me, touching and gripping my back as if he never wants to let me go.

That warm feeling I can't identify stirs in my gut as his lips move slowly against mine. Something flares inside me, something strong and bigger than I can pin down. Kai is my everything. He means more to me than I could ever imagine.

I'm not sure when it happened. It's like I woke up and Kai became my sun, and I had no choice but to orbit him. He is my center. Fuck, I'm in deep.

I release his lips, slapping his ass before I unwrap my arms from around him. Kai rolls his eyes, but he's smiling, a blush high on his cheeks. "Hurry up," he tells me impatiently. "Your hair looks fine. Stop fucking with it." I laugh and follow him out of the room.

Kai is pulling his dress shirt on when I step into the room. I look at him and shake my head. "Wait," I say, walking to my closet and opening my tall safe. I pull out a bulletproof vest and hand it to him. "Put this on."

He takes the vest from my hands, then looks up at me with a raised eyebrow. "I've been to charity events, and I don't remember stuffy suits shooting at us."

Something is telling me that Kai needs to be protected at all costs and if this helps—even just a little bit—I'll be less worried about him. "Put it on." I pause. "For me."

He sighs as if he's put out, but he does what I ask, sliding the vest over his ribbed undershirt, then pulling his dress shirt over it. "Happy?"

"As a clam."

His soft chuckle makes my chest tingle.

We dress in silence—I also put on a bulletproof vest so Kai doesn't feel alone—hide our guns under our jackets—Kai hides his favorite knife—and trot downstairs when we're ready. Once we make sure we have all the men that are assigned to watch out for us, we get going.

The event is swanky, a bunch of people that have more money than they need rubbing elbows with the who's who of the state. It'll be a boring, stuffy event, but the Whitlocks and St. Clair's have been attending and donating for years. It helps with our legit standing in the community.

I help Kai from the car, and we head inside to be bored out of our minds.

As soon as we step inside, I spot Declan and Hendrix by an ice sculpture, sipping drinks from their squat glasses. Even though they look relaxed, their eyes dart around, taking everyone in.

Kai and I head over to them. Declan up nods me and Kai, though he probably wouldn't have greeted him at all if he could help it. Declan will probably never like Kai, but he won't disrespect him again because of me. That'll have to be enough.

I paste a smile on my face and step closer to Declan. "See anyone here we need to worry about?"

"No. Looks like it'll be the same snooze fest it is every year."

Since we were kids, Dad would bring one of us to these events, so we'd know what we had to look forward to as we aged. I never liked them, and Declan did even less. But we don't have to stay long. Just enough time to donate and make sure we're seen by the rich elite in the room. Like we're normal, productive members of society.

Declan and I exchange a few words, then Kai and I excuse ourselves. We walk around, talking to different people and checking out the causes needing donations. I put down a one-million-dollar donation from our family for a statewide seminar on financial literacy. Kai pledges half a million to the arts, which surprises me, but he said it's because it was the only thing that sounds interesting.

As we walk past a group of older gentlemen smoking cigars and swirling brandy in a glass like they're passengers on the fucking Titanic, one of them stops Kai. Kai smooths his irritated expression quickly, but I caught it. I smile over at him, making him scoff.

"You're Kaison St. Clair, correct?"

To my surprise, Kai says, "St. Clair-Whitlock, yes." He entwines our fingers and stares at the man in an almost aloof way, like he doesn't care what he has to say about him being married to a man. My chest swells with pride that he's claiming me like this even if it's in front of people I don't know.

The man takes it in stride. "My apologies. Mr. St. Clair-Whitlock. I'm Bert Montgomery. I heard from a good friend of mine that you own St. Clair's Construction. I was wondering if you were interested in hearing a quick proposal. Or should I schedule a lunch with you?"

Kai looks nonplussed but recovers quickly. "Lunch would be best. My husband and I have a lot of people to talk to, and the silent auction is beginning."

"Of course. Do you have a card?"

Kai nods and pulls his wallet out, handing Bert his business card. Bert takes it, nodding in satisfaction. "I'll be calling you soon, Mr. St. Clair-Whitlock."

With a hand on the small of his back, I lead Kai over to the room that hosts the silent auction. Bending close to his ear, I whisper, "That was unexpected."

He nods. "Most of the time, I'm the one that puts my business out there. Maybe word is spreading."

I'm sure it is. Despite the shit the Fensters pulled with one of his builds and how Charlie tries to talk shit about his business, his company does very well. I wouldn't be surprised if most of Kai's money comes from the construction company. He told me he wanted to expand, which will bring in even more money.

A few weeks back, one of the construction sites for a strip mall was vandalized, the dry wall had holes kicked in them, all the pipes removed, and it was flooded with water. Spray painted on the walls was: *We're coming for you*. We all know it's the Fensters. The cops and the investors didn't place any blame on Kai and our illegal business, suspecting teenagers out doing dumb shit.

We walk around the silent auction, checking out the artwork and season tickets to football, basketball and hockey games. Nothing interests me, so I don't make any bids. Art isn't my thing—even though my house is full of expensive pieces—and neither I nor Kai have time to watch sports or attend games.

"Want a drink?" I point over to the open bar.

He nods, so I guide him in that direction. Before we get to the bar, Charlie materializes in front of us like he appeared out of thin air.

Kai sighs, though I see the brief flash of happiness in his eyes. I don't know why, but he still loves Charlie. Charlie doesn't fucking deserve Kai. "What are you doing here, Pop?"

"Making sure you don't squander the family money on some art bullshit your kind like."

"Fucking watch it, Charlie," I growl. If it weren't for the affection Kai had for him for some ungodly reason, I would have taken Charlie out by now. "I will fucking put you on your ass if you keep disrespecting Kai."

Charlie takes a step towards me, but Kai steps between us. "Any money I donate will come out of my pocket. Like everything has since I've been an adult. You don't have to come and fucking babysit me, Pop."

"You don't tell me what to do," Charlie seethes, his face red. I swear if he keeps that up, he'll have a fucking aneurysm. "I'll be here if I want. No matter what I said before, I'm still the head of this family. You're just in my way."

I don't have time to retort before Charlie storms off. Kai stomps over to the bar, ordering two shots, tossing them back before I can come to stand next to him. "Easy," I murmur, ordering us two beers to nurse. "Don't let Charlie get under your skin. Regardless of what he says, the St. Clair's are yours. He's a fucking angry old man that doesn't know how to stay in his fucking lane."

Kai makes a noncommittal noise as he drinks some of his beer. He polishes it off in two more swigs, then sets the empty on the bar. "I'm going to the restroom." He hustles off before I can check on him.

Fuck, Charlie is an ass. I can't figure out why he gives Kai so much shit, other than he's gay. My dad would be fucking thrilled if me or Declan owned a lucrative business. It'll only be a matter of time before Charlie and I come to blows because of the shit he talks to Kai. My husband can handle himself, but it's getting on my fucking nerves.

I tip my beer back to take a gulp, but my eyes snag on someone entering the building.

Sam Fenster.

Anger surges through me, but I keep my composure since we're in such a public place. His gaze connects with mine and he smiles like the fucking cat that caught the canary. Someone walks in my line of sight, and by the time they move, Sam is gone.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I fire off a quick text to Gavin, then Declan. Gavin and Nico are doing the rounds, making sure there is no danger.

Gavin responds immediately, telling me he's on the way to my location. Declan says he and Hendrix are upstairs but will head down immediately. I slide my hand into my jacket, gripping the handle of my gun while I look around for Kai. He said he was going to the restroom, but he should be back by now.

Commotion by the entrance catches my attention and I focus on the two men that are arguing. The noise level rises, the shouts reaching my ears clearly.

I stare at them for a moment, then it hits me. This is a fucking diversion. Just as the thought enters my mind, Gavin and Nico approach me.

And all hell breaks loose.

"Gun!" someone shouts, and everyone starts running towards the exits. Not even a second later, the ringing of gunshots rents the air. Screams crop up and the three of us are shoved back and forth, being separated by fleeing bodies.

I'm pushed against the bar, hissing when my ribs strike the edge hard. I shove the man that bumped into me and pull my gun from its holster, looking for danger. More shots ring out, one of them pinging off the bar when my hand just was. I look up and aim, seeing Gabbi Fenster standing near the stairs in a flowing red dress with a slit up the side and strappy red heels, trying to get another clear shot at me. I fire off two rounds, both striking her; one in the arm and one in the stomach. She doubles over but doesn't start bleeding from her belly. She must have a vest on, though how she managed it in that get up is beyond me.

As she scurries away, I give chase, keeping my eyes peeled for Kaison. I see Gavin tussling with a man in a white suit that I'm sure is one of the Fenster guards. When he gets the man to the ground, he plugs him with two bullets in the chest. He turns to me and gives me a nod and I return it, then move further into the room, wanting to locate Gabbi, but needing to find Kai. I'm not sure how she got away from me with those heels on, but with the confusion of people running in all directions, I couldn't keep her in my line of sight.

The ball room where the music was playing and people were dancing is a fucking shit show, attendants running around looking for an exit. A man runs in front of me and his head explodes, a bullet meant for me sinking into his skull. He drops heavily into me and more bullets riddle his body. I feel the force of them through my own body. If I weren't wearing a vest, they'd probably find their mark.

When the shooting stops, I push the body off me and get to my feet, rolling to the side quickly. Bullets ping off the floor, then one shatters a vase near where my head was. I find the shooter, then take him out with three well placed shots to the chest.

Just then, I see Kai, standing next to Nico and firing at the men across the room. I hurry over to them, needing to be near my husband, needing to protect him.

He looks up at me and says my name. Then he's struck by a bullet in the chest, the force so great, it takes him off his feet.

"Kai!" I shout, dropping beside him, not worried about bullets flying towards me. I grab him by the jacket and drag him into the room with the silent auction. Bodies litter the floor, but I don't care. None of them matter. Only Kai.

Behind cover, I look down at his prone body, afraid I'll see blood pouring from his shirt. It's ripped in places and there's an obvious entrance location, but he's not bleeding. He looks up at me dazedly, grabbing my hands that are in his shirt. "I'm okay," he says in a gruff voice. "I'm okay." He smirks shakily at me. "Good call with the vest."

"Fucking dammit, Kai," I force out past my tight throat. "Fucking dammit." I drop my head to his chest and breathe him in, forcing the tears to stay in place. I shudder when he buries his hands in my hair, holding me close.

My heart fucking stopped when I saw Kai go down. I thought I fucking lost him. In those short few seconds before I could see for myself, I couldn't breathe. My life flashed before my eyes, my days long and drawn out without the man I love.

Fuck, I fell in love with Kaison, and I almost fucking lost him. He's my world, my fucking sun and he was almost taken from me.

When I focus back on our surroundings, I realize the shooting has stopped. I peek out and see only my guys standing around, guns at their sides. "We're good." I turn to him, pulling open his shirt. Buttons fly everywhere, but I don't give a fuck. I undo the vest and place my hand on his chest, feeling his frantic heartbeat under my palm.

"You fucking scared me, Kaison. Don't do that again."

He pushes my hand away but falls against me. "Not like I asked to be shot, Carter." I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. "I'm okay," he says, his voice muffled against my chest. "Just sore."

I open my mouth to say something, *anything*, but I'm cut off by Gavin shouting my name. I help Kai up and we round the corner, finding both of our guards looking around for us. "Here," I say, holding on to Kai tightly. "You hurt?"

They both shake their heads. "Cops are coming," Nico says, hands on his hips. "Those fuckers crossed the line, bringing shit in public like this."

I agree as I look around at the carnage. Dozens of dead bodies litter the floor, most of them innocent civilians that were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The man that Kai gave his card to, Bert, lies on his back, his unseeing eyes peering up at the ceiling. Some of my men are either dead or dying, blood surrounding them. Men in white suits that I can only guess were Fenster men far outnumber the bodies of our dead, their prone bodies looking like so many piles of snow.

Rage consumes me. This has gone too far. We've been doing what we could to find the Fensters, but it was obviously not enough.

I don't give a fuck about collateral damage. What I do care about is how this will blow back on my family. How we'll now be under the spotlight of the cops. The only good thing is the Fensters will too. I bet they didn't count on any of their men dying, let alone about twenty. If they were smart, they would have waited until we left to try to take us out. They probably figured with more people around, it would be harder to pin anything on them. Fucking idiots.

Beside me, Kai makes a strangled sound. I look over at him, wondering what happened. I follow his line of sight and see he's looking at a man with most of his head missing. It takes a moment for me to realize it's Charlie.

Kai rushes over, grabbing Charlie by the front of his jacket. One hand hovers as if he wants to touch Charlie, but most of the remainder of his face is covered in blood and brain matter.

"Fuck, fuck," Kai mutters, tears making tracks down his face. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Walking over to him, I get on my knees beside him and turn his face towards me. "We'll get them," I promise vehemently. "We'll find them and kill them all."

"Carter, I don't...fuck." He looks back down at Charlie as if trying to memorize his face.

I'm not sure how long we sit there, but soon, the room is swarming with police. Everyone but Kai raises their hands over their heads, our weapons long forgotten. Thankfully, every gun brought here tonight is legally owned and registered, with no bodies connected to them. We can easily say we were shot at and defended ourselves. We also have the chief of police in our pockets, so not much will come out of this, other than the news and media.

After we're searched and released from the cuffs the cops put us in, I'm questioned on the events of tonight. Kai is taken to be checked out by an ambulance, his eyes vacant and his shoulders slumped.

Before Nico gets too far, I grab his arm. "Take him home for me. I'm not sure how long I'll be here." He nods and follows behind Kai and the paramedics.

The police ask me question after question. I answer them quickly, wanting to get home so I can take care of Kai. He doesn't look too good after holding the corpse of his father.

I don't tell the cops shit. I could easily tell them it was the Fensters so they could all be locked up and sent up the fucking river, but they're fucking mine. I don't want them to go to prison. The entire family will be fucking wiped out.

Maybe an hour later, I'm free to go with instructions not to leave town. I grunt and hustle out, Gavin hot on my heels. The sound of tires peeling fills the air as Gavin presses his foot to the floor and gets us home.

Less than twenty minutes later, he's pulling up to my house, men converging around me like a human shield.

Once inside, I find Nico standing outside the fancy sitting room I never use. "He's in there. He won't leave."

Nodding, I push past him and enter the room. Kai is sitting in front of the empty fireplace, staring into it with unfocused eyes. He still has on his bloodied shirt, his pants not faring any better.

"Baby," I whisper, walking over and kneeling before him. He doesn't answer or look at me. "Kai, baby, we gotta get you out of these clothes. You're a mess."

One beat passes. Then two. Then three. Finally, his unfocused eyes look over at me, taking me in as if just realizing I'm here. "Carter."

"Yeah, baby. It's me." I put a hand on his cheek and stroke it with my thumb, rubbing off some of the blood he got onto his face from Charlie. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"Pop. He's..."

I sigh, but nod. "Yeah, baby. I'm sorry." He nods, folding his lips in. Two tears fall quickly from his eyes, but I wipe them away just as fast. "Come on. Let me get you in the shower."

He nods stiffly and I help him from the chair. I wave Nico off when I step out of the room and walk Kaison upstairs to ours. When we get to the bathroom, I undress him, tossing his soiled clothes into a corner. Before I put him in the shower, I grab a cloth and wipe the blood from his face.

Once he's naked, I start to undo my clothes to get in with him, but he stops my fingers. "I want to be alone right now."

That's the last thing I want. I need to be there for him, especially now.

I didn't think Kai really liked Charlie. He always defended him, sure, but I didn't think he'd look so wrecked when he died. Honestly, I thought he'd feel relief that his dad wasn't talking shit to him about being gay or about his company. I figured he'd be glad to be rid of him.

Familial ties are a bitch.

Though I want to tell him no, that he needs me, I nod and stop trying to take my clothes off. "I'll be right outside. Shout if you need me."

He nods and walks to the shower, his posture that of a man that has nothing. My heart clenches.

I love you. I want to tell him so badly, but now isn't the right time. When he's better. Once he's better, I will.

As soon as I step into my room, my phone rings. I fish it out of my pocket and curse when I see my father's name on the screen. I answer quickly, stepping into the hallway. "Dad."

"Are you okay? Your brother? Kaison? What happened?"

I smile despite the shitty turn of events. Even though I spent most of my life hating my husband, Dad didn't hesitate to put that aside and welcome him like a son. "I'm fine. Declan is fine. I think the most we got are bumps and bruises. Kai, not so much. Charlie got killed."

Dad's heavy sigh drifts through the phone. "I heard. Charlie and I talked about this event, and I told him not to go. He's headstrong though, didn't want to listen." He pauses and sighs again. "Was headstrong. Where is Kai?"

"In the shower." I lean against the wall, beating my head against the hard paneling. "I don't know what to do, Dad."

"Be there for him. That's all you can do. You'll probably have to make arrangements for Charlie." I scoff, but Dad talks over me. "I ain't like that cocksucker either, but it's not for him, it's for Kai. Take this number down and call the funeral home in the morning." I pull my phone from my ear to put the number in, but it's fucking frozen. No matter how hard I try to exit from the call screen, it doesn't budge. "Hold on Dad. I have to get a pencil and paper."

I hurry down to my office and grab a pen and paper, jotting the number down as Dad rattles it off. "Who did this, son?" he asks after I blow out a long breath.

"The Fensters. I saw Sam and Gabbi. She shot at me. I got her in the arm before she ran off. I saw Sam before he took off to god knows where. I'm not sure why they made it so fucking public, but it was them."

My breathing is coming out in pants, and I have to force myself to calm down. I don't give a fuck about Charlie getting capped. He had it coming for a long time. What I do care about is how it hurt Kai. The Fensters hurt Kai, so they'll have to fucking die. All of them. Starting with fucking Sam and Gabbi. I'll kill both of those bitches myself.

I run through the events of the night, giving Dad the cliff notes. He hums when I finish. "What do you plan to do about it?"

"They're going to die. That's a given. But I need to wipe everyone out. The youngest in their family is nineteen. No children that I know of. I plan to erase their family name."

"Whatever you do, be smart. You hear me?"

"I know, Dad. Kai and I will talk it over with some experienced men from both families to come up with something. But the Fensters don't have too many sunrises left for them."

A few minutes later, we hang up and I figure Kai has had enough time to wash himself and wallow in the shower. I need to get back to help him dress and into bed. I plan to hold him all night, so he knows he's not alone.

Exhaling roughly, I walk down the hallway and push into the room. The water isn't running anymore, but I don't see Kai. When I step into the bathroom, I find it empty. Walking back into the room, I look around frantically, trying to figure out where he went.

Then my eyes land on his nightstand. Where his cell phone is.

And his wedding ring.

Thundering out of the room, I rush down the stairs to where Nico is in the kitchen. "Have you seen Kaison?"

He looks at me like I've grown two heads. "He's with you."

"No," I growl, "he's not. Where the fuck is my husband?!"

We both leave the kitchen and check the entire house. I even go through the entrances to the panic room, checking to see if he's hanging out down there. Nothing. He's nowhere in this house.

Kai is gone.

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CHAPTER 21



KAI

knew it was foolish to leave my ring and cell phone behind, but I had to get out of that house. I had to get away.

When I got dressed in a haste, I had no destination in mind. I wanted to walk, to get out of my own head for a while. Men were everywhere, patrolling the perimeter like we were the fucking Pope. It took too long for me to sneak past them, but I managed it, walking in the direction of where I ordered my cab.

I tell the cab driver to take me across town to a bar that I scoped out before. It's not owned by the Whitlocks, but they pay them protection money. So, they're in the Whitlocks pocket, but they won't know who I am. It's the perfect place to drown my sorrows.

Pop is dead. He's fucking dead. A bullet sheared off half his face. No matter how many times I repeat it, I can't wrap my head around it.

I haven't known how I felt about him for most of my life. I wanted his attention, his approval, but I'm not sure I loved him. So why am I so broken up about him dying? I can't explain it. I just know there's a gaping hole in my chest that I don't know how to fill.

Sitting at the bar, I point to the top shelf vodka and hold up five fingers. The man looks at me with a raised eyebrow but sets out five glasses and pours me five shots. I toss three back quickly, allowing the burn to settle something deep within my chest. It doesn't make me feel on the level by a long shot, but it stops my thoughts from spiraling too much.

Pop should have been at home. Dominic told me and Carter that, as heads of the St. Clair and the Whitlock families, we were expected to show up. We were there to represent the family. So why was Pop in attendance?

I scoff as I take the fourth shot, shaking my head as I flip the glass over and set it on the bar. He showed up because he hated me. He never wanted me to do anything on my own. As I sit and think about it, I realize that I was an accessory to Pop. A way to tell people he had an heir that would take over for him, but he never had any intention of letting me do it.

Why didn't I see this so clearly before? I knew he didn't like me, but I didn't want to believe he loathed me.

I knock on the bar once more and hold up five fingers again. The bartender walks over to me, leaning against the bar. "You got keys, friend?"

"Not driving and not your fucking friend. Pour me the drinks or give me the fucking bottle." The bartender just shakes his head and pours me five more shots. I waste no time swallowing two of them down. The burn has eased, making it easier to toss back the third. The rest follow quickly, the burn now nonexistent.

My limbs feel light, and I get a spacey feeling in my head. I feel tipsy, but it's not enough. I want to be drunk off my ass until I can't think. I don't want the events of tonight running through my head. Not just about Pop, but Carter.

He could have been killed tonight too. The fucking Fensters almost took the love of my life away from me.

I saw him go down with a body on top of him and I thought he was dead. My heart seized, thinking I would have to be without him forever. That bloody lump in my chest didn't start beating again until he stood up and called my name.

Carter saved me tonight in more ways than one. I wanted to fight against him when he handed me that vest. I've never worn one before and I didn't plan to start tonight. But when I saw the earnest look in his eyes, I knew I'd do anything for him.

"Fuck." I lower my head to the bar but snap it up again. A feeling of deja vu washes over me. I look around at the bar patrons, checking to see if three men will jump out of nowhere to rob me.

Shaking my head, I stand up from my stool and weave my way to the door. There won't be a repeat of what happened the last time I pulled a disappearing act. I make sure I go through the front door, nowhere near the

alley. No one follows me out, even though the bartender keeps his eyes on me. I give him a two-finger salute before I turn back to the street.

I pick a random direction, and I start walking, trying not to sway too much. The night air helps clear my mind and I'm able to focus on where I'm going. I have no destination in mind, just want to walk to get away from myself.

A faint smile crosses my lips when I stuff my hands in the pockets of my sweatpants. In *Carter's* sweatpants. Then my smile drops. Fuck, he's going to be pissed. I try to keep a hold of that thought, but nothing sticks. After a while, I let it go. That's a thought for sober Kaison. Right now, I need to take my mind off my father's death and how he was missing half his skull.

When I get my hands on them, I will fucking execute the Fensters. Every single one of them. With Carter by my side, we'll wipe them off the face of the Earth and I'll have a smile on my face the entire time. They fucked up not only by killing Pop but almost killing Carter.

A jolt flashes through my mind as I replay the burst of blood that clouded the air when someone aimed at him. My chest feels tight as I remember the pain I felt when I saw him go down. I couldn't get a good shot at the man that aimed his gun at him and only Nico's hand around my waist kept me from running out to make sure Carter was okay.

I don't know how long I walk. After a while, I let my mind wander away from the events of tonight. It felt good not to think about anything too heavy. I would continue to walk for the rest of the night, but my steps are getting sluggish, and my vision is starting to double. I sway on my feet and end up against the wall of a building. Putting my hands on my knees, I breathe in through my nose and blow it out through my mouth. Over and over I breathe so I don't vomit. Maybe that last shot was too much.

My head clears marginally, allowing me to stand and continue walking. Through my drunken state, I recognize the street I'm on.

Weaving down the sidewalk, the grungy building comes into view, and I smile. At least I have somewhere to sit for a few minutes.

Checking my pockets to make sure I at least have my wallet—I do—I enter The Devil's Den. Rubbing a hand down my face, I stand up straighter and hope I don't look as drunk as I feel.

I just want somewhere I can sit for a while to sober up. I can't go home to Carter like this. He's already going to be pissed that I took off during the

height of this war, the same night we were shot at. I want to at least have a coherent conversation with him about it.

My fingerprints are taken after I show my ID, and I'm allowed admittance to the club. The Devil's Den doesn't serve alcohol, so I plan to order a water, hoping to sober up. I'm not sure what I was thinking with ten shots of vodka. I never drink vodka, so I didn't know it would hit me so quickly.

I take a seat at the bar and order a water and a Coke. The server looks at me questioningly, but hands over my drinks. I guzzle the water, my mouth feeling dry and my tongue thick.

The coke I drink slower, taking small sips, hoping I don't feel the urge to vomit again.

"Hey," someone says, touching me on the back. A woman in a leather bustier and a spiked collar sits next to me. "Want to play? I'm looking for a Dom to punish me tonight."

"I saw him first," a male voice says from behind me. I try to turn to see who it is, but the room starts spinning so I stop. A man that has the same collar as the woman and a fishnet shirt stands on my other side. "I think he might be on my team."

"That's okay," she says, running a finger up my arm. "He doesn't have to fuck me to use that flogger. You see the muscles on him?"

The guy hums and squeezes my biceps. I move my arm to bat him off, but it's like I move in slow motion. My body feels light and heavy at the same time. "So strong. He could—"

"Go away," a new voice says, making my head spin more. "Leave him alone. He came to see me."

I know that voice.

Swallowing roughly, I turn around and see the tiny twink Carter and I tried to have some fun with when I hated him. The slim man has on another pair of hot pants, these ones dark purple. Paired with his tiny shorts is a sheer shirt that shows off his pierced nipples. He's hot, there's no doubt about it, but he's not Carter.

Swallowing past my thick, dry tongue, I say, "I'm not—"

"Come on, sweetie," Tiny Twink says, grabbing both of my hands and pulling me off my stool. "I have the room ready."

I trip over my feet, following behind him. I'm not sure why. I have no intention of doing anything with this man, so a room would be wasted, but I

don't want anyone else pawing over me either. At least I'm slightly familiar with tiny twink.

We walk down a hallway and make a left, away from the rooms with the open panels that I usually use, to rooms that are for private use. He opens the first vacant room and guides me to the bed, pushing me down until I'm lying on my back.

I bat his hands away. "No, don't. Nothing is gonna happen."

"I know," he says, and I note that the sultry hint to his voice is gone. "You're drunk and if security catches you, they'll toss you out. You're in no shape to be on the streets." He goes over and locks the door, leaning against it before turning to me. "Can I call someone for you?"

Nothing is funny, but I laugh anyway. "Yeah," I say through my laughing fit. "My husband. He's gonna be pissed."

Tiny Twink sighs. "What's his number?" I recite it to him, tripping over the numbers before I remember their order.

When Carter and I got married, I made sure to memorize his number in the event I was taken hostage and managed to get free. I didn't think I'd need it because I was drunk off my ass and left my phone at home on purpose.

"Stay here," Tiny Twink says in a voice louder than it should be. Or maybe it's my drunken brain amplifying the sound. "I'll give him a call and I'll come wait with you. Nothing will happen to you, and I won't try anything. I promise." He leaves before I can say anything further.

Carter is going to flip out. I wonder what he's doing.

I sit up and put my head in my hands, the room spinning around me. This was a mistake. I shouldn't have left like that. My head was all fucked up with Pop being killed and Carter being shot at, but I shouldn't have run. That's my default when shit gets to be too much—I take off. When Pop pissed me off, I would leave. When something at my company didn't go right, I would leave. I never face shit head on. I never stick around to fix what might not even be broken.

After a night like tonight, if Carter had taken off, leaving his cell phone and ring behind—both of which have GPS tracking on them—I'd be worried. Then when I found out he was okay, I'd be fucking livid.

If I know Carter, he will be. And I can't run from whatever he feels. If he wants to shout at me, fight me, fucking choke me out, I'll let him. I fucked up. I need to face that.

The door opens and Tiny Twink steps back in. He takes a seat on the chair across from me, looking at me quizzically. "Are you okay?"

"No. Not at all. I shouldn't have come here. I should have stayed home with my husband."

He nods, looking at me with solemn eyes. "If you want to talk, you can. I'm not sure how long it'll take your husband to get here. Or we can just sit in silence. Up to you."

"What's your name?" I ask suddenly. "I keep calling you Tiny Twink in my head."

He laughs loudly, and it sounds melodic. It flows over me, reminding me of Carter. Not because they sound the same, but because they sound so different. If I didn't know before, I know now. I fucking love my husband.

"It's Jamie. What's yours?"

"Kai. Kaison. St. Clair-Whitlock. I took my husband's last name too. He's...he's amazing. Weirdly funny. Like that dry humor. He makes these stupid jokes that aren't funny. I don't laugh because I like to rag on him, but I enjoy them. And he's hot as fuck." I look over at Jamie, who is gazing back at me with interest. Not like he's interested in me, but about me talking about Carter. "I used to hate him. For years, I hated him. We fought all the time. I never thought he'd end up being the perfect man for me."

"That's sweet," he says, smiling at me. "Not many people like their husbands."

"Yeah, I like him. I love him, actually. Never thought it would happen. Never thought I was capable of love. But Carter...he's everything I didn't know I needed. I think the sun rises and sets on him. He is my everything."

Jamie sighs with his hand on his chest. "That's the kind of love I want. It's precious."

"It's scary as fuck. I almost lost him tonight. I thought—"

A loud knock rattles the door, making Jamie jump violently. He scurries over and unlocks it, stepping out of the way just as Carter rushes through. He takes me in, my rumpled shirt, my hair that's probably wild all over my head and turns to Jamie with a murderous expression. Jamie steps back, holding his hands up.

"Nothing happened," he says, voice trembling. "I'm the one that called."

"He's telling the truth, babe," I say, my voice slurred. "He led me here so I could rest. Are you here to take me home?"

Carter stares at Jamie for another few seconds, then looks at me. The murderous expression bleeds away, replaced with concern. "Yeah, pretty baby. I'm here to take you home."

"Good. I wanna go home." My voice sounds so small; I barely recognize it.

An arm wrapped around my shoulder, Carter leads me out of the room. When we get to the club proper, I see Gavin and Nico waiting by the entrance. Nico shoots me a hard look, no doubt pissed that I slipped out on him for a second time. I'll have to fucking grovel to get his forgiveness this time. But I'll do it. Whatever it takes.

No more running.

The ride home is spent in silence, Carter holding me close. I cling to him as well, not wanting to let him go. Ever.

He helps me inside since I'm still drunk and stumbling. The stairs are difficult after the first two or three, but we make it. In our room, he sits me on the bed, bending down and taking off my shoes. He undresses me down to my underwear, then tucks me between the sheets.

"Carter, I—"

He puts a finger to my mouth, shaking his head with sorrowful eyes. A long sigh leaves his lips before he says, "Just go to sleep, Kai."

Turning over to my left side so he can paste himself to my back, I do what he says and go to sleep.



I'M NOT sure what woke me. One minute, I was asleep, the next, I'm staring up at the ceiling. The night is still, like we're frozen in time. From how he's breathing, I know Carter is awake too. Did we wake up at the same time or had he been awake while I slept off my drunkenness?

"You okay?" Carter asks, his face is tucked into my neck.

"No." It's the most honest I've been with him about my feelings. While Carter has been all in, saying and doing whatever he feels, I've held a part of myself back. I didn't want to admit it earlier tonight, not even to myself, but what Pop always said to me affected me more than I thought.

He told me I'd always be alone. He said I'd always be a failure. He said I would never do anything to make this family proud. I brushed him off while he was saying these things, but they burrowed deep into me, shifting something inside me that I didn't know was off.

Then Carter came along and started shifting that piece back into place, making me whole again. The person I least expected makes me feel like a man I haven't known for years. He's done more for me in the few months that we've been married than my own father did in my entire life.

It's still baffling that I reacted the way I did when I saw Pop's corpse. A weight is lifted from my shoulders, but that pesky hole is still gaping in my chest. Maybe Carter can help fill that too.

His lips on my neck ground me, pulling me out of my spiral of thoughts. "What do you need?" There's no anger in his tone. No annoyance, no irritation. Just worry. It's so profound that it makes my heart ache.

"I need you not to leave me. I know I fucked up, running again, but I'll do better. It won't happen a third time. Just...don't leave me."

"Kaison," he breathes, sitting up to look down at me. "I won't say I'm not pissed that you ran away from me. I won't say I'm not fucking livid that you left your phone and ring behind. I won't say I wasn't half out of my mind, thinking somehow, the Fensters found a way to take you away from me. All those things are true." I look away, shame lighting up my chest. Carter cups my cheek and turns me back to face him. "But I wouldn't leave you. We have a lot to talk about, especially because of Charlie's death and how you're dealing with it, but I understand the urge to run."

"I'm really sorry, Carter," I whisper in a tear drenched voice. I've never felt this all-consuming feeling before. Like I'll die if he doesn't forgive me. I've never been worried about losing anyone before, but the thought of Carter leaving me makes my chest constrict. "I didn't mean to worry you."

His thumb strokes my cheek, and I lean into his touch, relishing the feeling of his hands on me. This is the shit that Carter does that lets me know he's all in. He shows me his feelings. He gives me affection. He calls me by my pet name for everyone to hear.

I'm right there with him, wanting to show him and the world that he's mine and we're forever.

Carter smiles down at me, the moonlight reflecting off his even teeth. "I know you didn't. I know why you ran. Just...Kai, don't run from *me*. You have to know I'll always be there for you. You can talk to me about

anything, and I won't run. Not from you. We're a team now. Anything you go through, I go through."

I nod, unable to speak for a few moments.

Arranging himself better on the bed, Carter pulls me into his arms and holds me tight. "How are you feeling? About Charlie?"

My shoulders lift in a shrug. "I don't know. It was fucked seeing half his face blown away. I just wish...I don't know, that maybe angry words weren't the last we'd spoken to each other. Pop rarely had a kind word for me, but I'll have to live with knowing that our last conversation was him telling me I wasn't good enough."

Carter's heavy sigh rumbles under my head, his chest rising and falling with the motion. "You are good enough, Kai. Always know that. Charlie was an ass and could think what he wanted, but that doesn't mean he was right. I'll spend the rest of our lives proving it to you."

My arms wrap tighter around Carter, never wanting to release him. He wraps me up just as tight, holding me together. I fear if he lets me go, I'll rent in two. "My father is dead, Carter."

"I know, pretty baby. And I'm sorry. I'll help you get arrangements in order, and with the financial side of things. We'll get through it. I promise."

A sad smile tugs at my lips. "Thank you."

We lie silently in bed for a few minutes and my eyes start to feel heavy. Before I can doze off, Carter rolls on top of me and puts his hand around my throat. He applies pressure, making my eyes bug out. His eyes have taken on that murderous look, causing fear to lance through me.

Putting his face close to mine, he snarls, "If you ever take off your fucking ring again, I will fucking kill you. I love you too fucking much to lose you because you're being a fucking idiot."

Even though my breathing comes out choppy, my heart feels light. Carter loves me. Carter loves me. God, he's a fool for that, falling in love with me. He'll never be able to get rid of me now.

I nod frantically, placing my hand over his. He lets me go and I drag in a ragged breath. Then I smile. A real, genuine smile, which Carter returns. "I love you too, babe."

He kisses me softly, nestling his body between my legs. "Don't run from me again."

"Never again," I say between kisses. "I won't run."

Resting his forehead against mine, Carter's gentle breaths drift over my lips. "I can't live without you, Kaison. A man can't live without his heart." He places his hand on my chest, over that wildly beating organ behind my ribs. "You're my fucking heart."

"Just like you're mine."

"I'd do anything for you. You know that, right?"

I nod, a small smile spreading on my face.

Carter rolls over to lie beside me, dragging me into his arms again.

"And Carter?" I say against his chest. He tips my head up so I'm meeting his eyes. "Send the twink from The Devil's Den a tip or something. He's the one that kept the vultures away. He didn't try anything. He got me away so he could call you."

Carter's lips twitch just before he gives me a soft kiss. "Anything you want, Kaison." Then he reaches over to his nightstand, grabs my ring, and slides it back on my finger.

Where it belongs.

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CHAPTER 22



CARTER

anning Charlie's funeral during a war where the opposing family has no fucking morals is hard, but we get it done. Unlike for anyone else that dies in our families, especially the inner circle, we throw them an extravagant send off, no expenses spared. The city is shut down, no illegal dealings done to honor the dead. But with the Fensters god knows where, we can't afford to do anything like that.

The funeral we hold for Charlie St. Clair the next week is intimate, with only his immediate circle and ours in attendance. We have his service graveside, and we don't stay longer than thirty minutes. I think Kai appreciated not being there for long, since he's still conflicted on how he feels about his dad.

I arranged everything so Kai wouldn't have to. It was more than Charlie deserved. If it were up to me, I would have tossed his ass in a ditch and let the birds have at him, but that would have hurt Kai. I'd cut off my right arm before allowing him to be hurt.

The family has a cemetery and Charlie already paid for his plot, but we knew the Fensters would expect us to bury him there. Kai suggested we keep his body on ice and wait until the war was over to lay him to rest, but none of us knew how long that would be. So, we buried him outside the city with plans to exhume him when everything settles down.

Now we're sitting in his home office, going over all the financial reports on his legal businesses. Charlie was in the hole close to eleven million dollars, a large sum when I know he makes more than that moving drugs and guns. What the fuck was he spending all that money on?

Kai grunts as I look over his shoulder, shuffling through paperwork for The Reef Casino, their largest holding. "He was behind on his taxes for the past five years. Wanna know how much it was?"

"Tell me," I say, scanning over another set of paperwork for his house and all the bills.

"Eleven million dollars. Wanna know how much my construction company is worth?"

I already know the answer to that. Now it all makes sense. Charlie's disparaging comments about the construction company not being profitable, suggesting that Kai sign it over to him. He probably planned to sell it to the highest bidder to cover his back taxes.

Kai shakes his head. "Pop was a fucking cunt."

I bark a laugh, not expecting his comment. "He was something."

"Maybe I should let it fail. Let it go back on the market and someone else can have that headache."

"Is that what you want?" I lean against the desk and cross my arms.

He stares off into space, quiet for a few breaths. Sighing, he shakes his head, pushing his fingers through his hair. "No. I just don't have eleven million dollars on hand to fucking pay this bill."

Shrugging, I say, "I do." Kai looks at me sharply. "What? I do. Dad put me in charge of our drug sales when I was eighteen. I have about five times that squirreled away. I can give it to you."

He narrows his eyes at me, studying my face. "You can *loan* it to me. And I'll pay back every cent. With interest."

Smiling, I bend to plant my lips on his. "Whatever you want, pretty baby."

As they always do, Kai's cheeks redden when I call him pretty. I run my fingers over the heated flesh, then kiss him once more.

Kai exhales roughly when I release him. "At least we're not completely broke. We have product that we're delivering to our contacts in DC. That'll bring in a few million. Everything else is tied up in these shitty investments he made."

"Pull it all out. You'll be at a loss, but you can rebuild and reinvest when you have more money. I can help you there. The only saving grace is Charlie kept good faith with your coke, heroin and weapons customers. You'll make back any money Charlie pissed away."

Even though he nods, I can see the apprehension clearly on his face. Fucking Charlie. If the cocksucker wasn't dead, I'd kill him all over again for the shit he put Kai through.

Turning his chair around, I kneel between his legs and look up at him, hoping he reads the sincerity on my face. "You can do it, Kai. You're smart enough. You're driven enough. You're *good* enough. Don't ever doubt that."

Kai smiles at me and nods. He leans forward to give me a kiss but stops short with raised voices reach our ears. "The hell?" he asks distractedly, trying to hear what's going on.

I pause as well, straining to make out the words, but the door is shut, and the shouting seems to be coming from the foyer. Eyebrows scrunched, I go to the door and pull it open, sticking my head into the hallway.

There are St. Clair's and Whitlocks milling around the house in honor of Charlie. Most of them here couldn't make it to the service because of the small crowd we had. They either offered Kai their condolences or pledged that they'd follow him just as they did Charlie. Kai takes this all in stride, as we've already been in the position as heads of the family. I wanted to cut the tongue out of the mouth of every man that utters some shit about following Kai *now*. But again, I controlled my temper so I wouldn't upset Kai.

With the door open, the voices become clearer and I recognize one of them as Declan. I look back at Kai, who has a bewildered look on his face. "It's my brother. The fuck is going on?"

Coming from his seat at the desk, Kai follows me downstairs. When we hit the bottom step, the scene before me doesn't make sense. One of Charlie's guards is in Declan's face, shouting at him at the top of his lungs. Declan's face is contorted in anger, but he doesn't try to defend himself.

"And if you fucking say anything," the guard yells, spittle flying from his mouth, "I'll say you're a fucking liar because you are. Fucking Whitlocks—"

Whatever else he wanted to say is cut off when Declan pulls out a blade from his sleeve and buries it in the man's neck. The man falls to the ground and Declan follows him down, burying the knife in his eye.

"Declan, what the fuck?" I run over and pull him off. I grab his bloodsoaked hands and hold them at his side. "What the fuck?" I repeat.

"He fucking deserved it," Declan says in a sharp voice.

Kai steps over to the man and kicks at his feet, his face set in a hard mask. "Because he was talking shit about your family?" He looks up at Declan, his eyes hard. "That's no reason—"

Declan pulls out of my arms, whirling around to look at me. "He was going to kill you. That's why I fucking offed him."

My head snaps back. "Kill me? What are you going on about?"

"I heard him on the phone, telling someone he'd cut your brakes to make it look like an accident. I listened first, used my head like you told me. I *heard* him."

"Do you have proof?" Kai asks.

"Proof?" Declan's face scrunches up as if he's never heard the word before. "I just fucking told you I heard him. Check his phone. Ask the person he just talked to."

Kai does just that, calling the number. A woman answers the phone. "Who is this?" Kai barks into the phone.

"Uh, Whitney." She sounds young, not like someone that just listened to someone threaten to kill me. "Who is this?"

"Who's number is this?"

"I think his name is Diego. I don't know. He called to make an appointment for his daughter to get her nails done."

Declan's face clouds with rage and he tries to snatch the phone from Kai. "You're a fucking liar!" he shouts.

"Look, what is this about?" Whitney asks, but Kai hangs up.

"You can't just kill people that talk shit to you, Declan," Kai says.

"Oh, fuck you, Kai! I didn't just kill him because he talked shit to me." He pushes Kai in the chest, and I see red.

Reaching out, I grab Declan by the back of his jacket and slam him against the wall, putting my hand to his throat. Declan's eyes grow wide when I apply pressure. "Do not touch my fucking husband."

The hurt that flashes in his eyes sends a fissure through me, but Kai is my world. Declan needs to control himself.

My brother pushes me off, rubbing at his throat, leaving a mark of blood behind. "You're taking his side over mine?"

"I'm taking the side of what the fucking evidence says," I counter. "You're a fucking hot head, ready to kill at the drop of a hat."

"And it's saved your fucking life more times than I can count!" he shouts. By now, we've gathered a crowd, some listening to the drama, others cleaning up the body in the middle of the floor.

Declan shakes his head, gliding a bloodied hand through his hair. "You know what? Fuck you, Carter. And fuck you too, Kai. I'm not wrong. I just hope neither of you is in a fucking pine box when you figure it out." With that, he brushes past me and Kai and heads to the door. Everyone gives him a wide berth, knowing Declan will kill them if they tried to stop him.

I curse, tugging at the ends of my hair. Declan and I have our issues, but we've never had a blow up like that. I know he's going to be pissed at me for a while since I took Kai's side over his.

But come on, did he really expect me to let him push my husband around? Kai can more than take care of himself, but I know he wouldn't have because of me. Declan was dead ass wrong, and he knows it.

"Fucking disperse," Kai says to those still standing around, gawking. "The fucking show is over." He snaps his fingers, stopping two men. "Get a bucket and fucking clean this shit up," he says, pointing to the blood on the floor.

Not wanting to be around anyone right now, I turn on my heels and storm outside to the back patio. I draw in a deep breath as soon as I step outside, the chilly air filling my lungs. The cool autumn breeze drifts over me, ruffling my hair.

I put my hands on my hips and look up at the sky. Declan is a hot head, and he knows it, but he's gotten better. After that shit he pulled with the Reyes family, he hasn't been off the rails. Even the kill when Kai and I announced our new standings in our families was necessary, not something done on a whim. What happened this time? Was it because of the shit with the Fensters? The stress of it all?

No, that can't be it. Declan doesn't get stressed. When he has to be, he's calm under pressure. What triggered this shit today?

Even though I'm pissed at Declan and the shit he just pulled, I smile at the presence at my back.

Kai's warm hand lands on the small of my back, the weight settling my thoughts. "You okay?"

"I will be. You?"

He steps in front of me, an eyebrow raised. "You know I can take care of myself, right?"

I nod. "I know. I'm sorry. I just...I don't like anyone touching you."

"That's how I feel about you. But next time, let me handle it. I wouldn't have hit him," he says quickly, "but I could have handled it."

Again, I say, "I know. It won't happen again."

Kai runs a trembling hand through his hair. It's only then that I focus on the dark circles under his eyes and the tiredness swimming in his gaze. He's fucking beat. I thumb at the purple bruises, a pang going through my chest as I look upon his face. He needs me. I need to take care of him.

Kicking myself for not paying him the attention he needs, I entwine our fingers and walk backward with him. "Let's go home and watch a movie. You need to relax. Security is heightened, so you don't have to worry that we're not safe."

"Thanks, babe." Even his words sound exhausted.

"Anything for you, pretty baby."

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CHAPTER 23



KAI

ou both should hear this," Nico says to me and Carter after he knocks on his office door. We both look up at him in surprise, wondering what requires both our attention. Even more surprising is Nico has some man with bruises on his face by the scruff of his neck.

It's been a few days since Pop's funeral. Before Carter and I went inside to shower and watch a movie, I knew I had to talk to Nico so I could apologize to him. I think it had much to do with the funeral taking a lot out of me that he stopped to let me talk to him. I caught him just as we came back home, where the four walls of the house would trap him and make him listen.

"Nico," I called when we got home, and he had one foot on the bottom stair. I told Carter to start the shower so we could get in and I'd be up shortly. Carter looked like he wanted to tell me to fuck off, but I needed to talk to Nico alone.

When it was just the two of us, I approached Nico and put my hand on his shoulder. "Listen—"

Nico turned around before I could step back and socked me in the jaw. It was so sudden that I fell on my ass, looking up at him in shock.

He stood over me, vexation shining in his eyes. "Twice, Kai. Twice you ran out without me. You could have fucking died. Then where would I be?"

I shook my head. "Carter would have given you another job. He would—"

Growling, Nico grabbed me by the front of the shirt and hauled up me, shaking me so hard my teeth clacked together. "It's not about a fucking job, Kai. You're my fucking brother. Where would I have been if you died? And on my watch? How do you think that would have fucked me up?"

I knew it would hurt him that I ran off, but not this much. I considered Nico my brother as well, but I wasn't thinking about him when I left. It was all me, all my shit. No one, not even Carter, was on my mind. I just had to get away.

I explained as much to Nico, his hands slowly relaxing in my shirt. "I'm sorry, Nico. I really am. My head..." I shook my head and Nico dropped his hands. "My head was too fucked up to think about anyone else. But I promise I won't do it again. I'm a fucking grown man and need to talk about shit like one. You have my word."

Nico looked at me skeptically, but I didn't take offense. I told him before I wouldn't take off without him and I fucking did.

He scoffed and walked up the stairs. "If you do and you're not dead, I'll fucking kill you myself."

That was as close to an acceptance as I would get.

I had to keep Carter in the shower when he saw the bruise on my jaw. While he said he understood the urge to sock me, no one but him had that right.

He said the sweetest things.

"What is it? And who the fuck is that?" Carter asks in a sharp tone. He's still sore that Nico hit me. I fight back a smile at his attitude.

Nico throws the man to the floor. The bruised man glares at both me and Carter. I have no idea who he is. "Tell them what you told me," Nico says harshly.

"What you made me tell you," the man corrects, then spits a glob of blood on Carter's floor. "Diego got orders to kill Carter."

"Orders from who?" Carter asks in a nonchalant manner, though I see his eyes flash.

"Charlie St. Clair." The beat-up man grins at me, his teeth bloodied. "Your daddy wanted your husband dead, and you were gonna follow as soon as you had control of his family."

Nico pulls out his gun and clocks the man on the back of the head with enough force to send him tumbling to the ground. "Show some fucking respect."

"Why?" the man asks, his voice muffled from the carpet he's eating. "Charlie should be where he stands. Diego and I would have seen to that."

I lift my foot and connect with his chin, sending him to his back with a loud pain laced groan. "Charlie is fucking dead. And you will be too."

"Not in my office," Carter says with a smile in his tone as he stands beside me. "Nico, get Gavin and take this scum to the basement. I'll call my brother and have him do the honors of offing him."

The man shoots daggers at us as Nico pulls him to his feet. He opens his mouth to spew some foul shit, but Nico puts a gun to his temple and snarls, "If you open your fucking pie hole, I'll fill you with lead."

He clamps his mouth shut though his expression doesn't change. Nico pulls him out of the office and it's only Carter's hand on my shoulder that stops me from following so I can do the deed myself.

"It's Declan's kill," he says. "It'll be a present to him when I have to swallow my fucking pride and apologize to him."

I roll my eyes. "You and me both."

Declan is not happy to be summoned to our home, but there are more men here, which means tighter security. He storms into Carter's office, his face twisted in a mask of irritation. "The fuck do you want? Wanna beat me up again because your husband breathed in my direction?"

Carter huffs but walks closer to his brother. "No, dickhead. I wanted to apologize and tell you you were right."

Declan rears back, confusion clouds his features. "Say what now?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, Carter explains what we just heard from the guy that Nico brought in. He must have been the one Declan heard on the phone with Diego. I'm not sure how they managed to get someone else on the phone to lie for them so fast, but I'll task someone to get to the bottom of it.

A smile tweaks Declan's lips as he looks from Carter to me. "Bet it hurts to know I was right, don't it?"

"More than you know," I answer honestly.

Carter rolls his eyes. "Look, the man is in the basement. He's your kill. Take care of it. My apology to you."

Declan looks at me again. "I don't like you."

I shrug. "That's fine. I ain't goin nowhere."

"I know. I don't like you, but I wouldn't disrespect your house and kill someone that didn't deserve it. Especially the day your father was buried.

Charlie was a cunt, but my Dad taught me better than that."

That's probably as much as I'll get from Declan. Unlike Carter, he doesn't let go of grudges. He isn't disrespectful in front of the men, and he follows whatever orders Carter or I give him. He doesn't have to like me; he just has to respect me.

He also has a point. Pop was a cunt. He was a fucking selfish asshole that wanted me and my husband dead. And after he had us out of the picture —if he had it his way—he would have gone after Declan and Dominic. He would have failed, but I know Pop would've tried. He was a greedy, irresponsible son of a bitch.

"Come back here when you're done," Carter says when Declan turns his back. "I want to talk to you about possibly going on the offensive with the Fensters. They started the war, but I plan to fucking finish it."

Declan takes his leave and Carter and I go back to looking over floor plans for the new casino.

After the funeral, I reached out to the IRS to pay off the taxes for The Reef. I had to put a lien on St. Clair Constructions to guarantee I'd pay it in full, which pissed me off more than I can describe. He fucked around with his money and my business has to suffer. Carter said he'd give me all the money, but I didn't want the IRS in my business about where I got eleven million dollars so quickly. He didn't like that solution, but it was the best we had.

Thirty minutes later, Declan comes back to the office with a smile on face. "Haven't had a kill where they didn't beg for their lives in a while. That was fun."

I shake my head. Only Declan would think that was fun. I like when they beg. I like their screams, their agony.

Declan is weird.

Shaking his head, Carter waves his brother over. He moves the casino floor plans out of the way to show another set for a large mansion. "Come look at this. This is supposed to be the floor plan for Anthony's house. They probably won't be there, but we can raze it, set that bitch on fire to draw them out. If not that, we can start going after their businesses."

Declan shakes his head. "They'll expect that. Imagine the traps they'd have. They would expect us to go there first. We have to look deeper. Where else would they be hiding? What other properties do they own?

Other aliases? You're thinking too small for someone like Anthony. This is shit Dad and Charlie's generation would do."

Carter told me that Declan had a strategic mind and I'm seeing it firsthand. Honestly, I never would have thought the Fenster's would be elsewhere. With the arrogance they displayed with the very public attack on us at the charity gala, I would have thought they'd stay put to prove a point. But they don't want to die. They want us to. The simplest way for them to accomplish that is for us to race to their house, half-cocked and possibly get ourselves blown to fucking high heaven.

Pushing my hand through my hair, I look up at Declan. "What do you suggest?"

He shrugs. "Research. It's been over a week, and we haven't retaliated. They'll probably try something before too long to draw us out. We can't fall for it. If we do, we'll all die." His earnest eyes bore into me and I give him a nod.

Of course he's right, even though I don't want to give him the credit. I don't really care for Declan, but I won't be a dumbass and not take his advice.

Rounding the desk, Carter takes a seat and opens his laptop. He presses a few keys and turns it around to Declan. "Do your research. We need to figure out where the fuck they are. Now."

Declan pulls a chair closer to the laptop and starts whatever his work is.

My phone pings as I stare at Declan's fingers moving across the keyboard. I have no clue what he's looking for, but he seems on a mission.

Absently, I pull my phone out and see an email notification. I haven't gotten an email in ages.

I open it up and see a video file titled VERY IMPORTANT. A message follows.

This is a video of the last will and testament of Charles Joseph St. Clair. Please view and contact attorney Grace Zeller with any questions at 340-555-7979.

WAVING CARTER OVER, I show him. "What do you think?" "Spam?"

Shrugging, I show Declan. He stops what he's doing and presses something on my phone. "Looks like it came from a legit email." He looks at Carter. "Is this computer encrypted?" Carter nods. "Log in to your email here and we'll check it out. If it's some bullshit, it won't infect any of Carter's files."

Declan vacates his seat and allows me to log into my email to view the video. As far as I know, Pop didn't have a written will. He was too arrogant to think he could die. The only saving grace is I was listed as co-owner for a lot of his businesses without my knowledge. I'm also familiar with his contacts for his drugs and gun sales, so it's been easy to continue those relationships.

Confusion settles in my gut when the video plays and all that shows is Pop's gravestone, the mound of dirt just spouting weeds around the edges.

Then dread forms low in my belly. They found his grave. "Son of a bitch," I mutter, staring hard at the screen, my hands balled into fists so tight, my nails dig into my flesh.

Then two people, a woman I don't know and Sam Fenster walk on screen. The woman is stark naked, her tits swaying as she pulls Sam back to where the dirt is piled over where we laid my father to rest.

She gets on her hands and knees, reaching behind herself to play with her pussy. Sam hurriedly pulls down his pants, settles behind her and thrusts into her. He starts to pound her immediately, her high, annoying moans burrowing to my ears.

Declan makes a noise in the back of his throat that I thought was arousal. When I look at him, all I find is disgust.

"No fucking respect," he spits, shaking his head and walking over to the window. "No fucking respect for the dead."

I mean, Pop wasn't someone who earned respect, but this is a new low. Fucking on the grave of your rival? Some things are off limits, and this is one of them.

"Turn it off," Carter says through clenched teeth.

I shake my head. "No. There are five more minutes. They might say something. There might be a message."

Continuing to watch sets my teeth on edge, but I do it. Not only does it disgust me, but it also fuels me to fucking kill them all with my bare hands if I can.

About two minutes later, Sam pulls out of the woman and turns to Pop's grave marker, spraying his jizz all over it.

A growl percolates up my throat, my vision whiting out with my anger. "I will fucking kill that cocksucker," I snarl.

Before the video ends, three other men step into frame, including Anthony Fenster. He smirks at the camera, pulls his dick out and they all start pissing on my father's grave.

When he's done, Anthony stuffs his cock back in to his pants and walks to the camera that I assume is set up on a tripod. With an evil grin on his face, he says, "You can't hide from us. We're coming for everything the St. Clair's and Whitlock's have."

The video ends and I explode from the chair, grabbing Carter's computer and throwing it across the room. I scream, the force of it so hard the back of my throat hurts. I'm fucking livid and have no fucking outlet for it. No one knows where these sons of bitches are, so I can't take my frustrations out on their flesh.

Carter wraps an arm around me, but I push him away. His eyes flare, but he doesn't try to approach me again. "Don't leave," he murmurs.

As quickly as the fight engulfs me, it deflates. My chest still rises and falls rapidly, but the anger isn't burning as white hot as it was before.

Pushing my hair from my face, I blow out a long breath and walk over to him. "I'm not. I'm just...I'm pissed. I told you I'm not going to run again, and I mean it. Fuck, Carter. What are we going to do?"

"I'm not sure, pretty baby, but I'll make sure they pay." Tentatively, he walks over to me and puts his hands on my cheeks, framing my face. "We'll make them pay. Okay?"

I nod and rest my forehead against his chest. I still feel like screaming and throwing shit across the room but I need to control my temper so I make sure the bastards on that video pay.

All of them.

Declan curses and both Carter and I turn to look at him. "Someone's coming. Someone...shit! Get down!"

Without questioning him, we hit the floor. A few seconds later, the whole house shakes, pieces of the ceiling dropping all around us.

"The fuck was that?" Carter asks, pulling his gun out. Seconds later, the office is flooded with our guards, Nico, and Gavin ahead of everyone. When they get to us, they take our arms and pull us out of the room.

"Rocket launcher," Declan says, trailing behind them. "Hit near the kitchen."

"Those fucking—" Carter tries to dart off to go downstairs, but Declan grabs him, slamming him against the wall. "I know you're pissed. But fucking think Carter. They want you and Kai. You need to get the fuck out of here." Another explosion rattles the house, closer to where we are. The lights flicker, but they don't go off. "We need to go now."

Even though he looks like he wants to do anything but, Carter allows himself to be pulled from the room.

Carter pushes away from the guards and runs down the hall to his room and we all follow behind him. I wonder at it for a moment, then I remember Carter saying all the upstairs rooms, including mine and Nico's have a secret entrance in his closet that leads down to his basement and his panic room.

"Is that body cleaned up from downstairs?" he asks over his shoulder.

"Yep," Gavin replies. "I took care of it myself."

I look over at Nico. "How many are out there?" I ask, thumbing to the window.

"By my quick estimate, thirty. Maybe more. We could probably handle them if they just had guns but—"

Another bang sounds in the house and it makes the whole house shake. "Bastards came with toys," I finish the sentence.

"In." Carter stands to the side and ushers us into the closet. No one in the room looks like they want to run away. It's in our nature to stay and fight, but all of us know if we do, we'll die.

Listening to the gunshots that sound outside, I know some of our men are being killed. My entire being urges me to run out and help them, but like Declan says, I need to be smart. A lot of the men we had patrolling are here now, so not everyone will be a casualty.

Despite Declan being the one to suggest we leave, indecision clouds his face. Stepping beside him, I grab his forearm. "You gotta be smart too," I tell him.

His face morphs from indignation to resignation and he nods and steps around me. We all hurry single file through the secret door at the back of Carter's closet no one would notice if they didn't know it was there. When the last man is through, Carter locks the door and sets the alarm.

We take the back stairs down to the basement and instead of exiting out through the gym, Carter pushes through another door. He looks back at all of us. "We got about a mile walk, but this tunnel leads to a service shed on another property. No one knows it's mine. Follow me."

We all follow behind Carter, the sounds of shooting and violence dimming the further we get away. Everything in me wants to turn back and put some bullets in people, but like Declan says, it's not smart. I don't want to just kill a few Fenster men; I want to kill the entire family. Strike their fucking names from the census.

"Dad," I hear Carter say, his phone pasted to his ear. "We got hit. The Fensters are at my place. You need to get out of town, now." He pauses for a few seconds to listen, then relief crosses his face. "Okay. I'll let you know when we're settled."

Carter hangs up and meets Declan's worried eyes. "He's not in the country. He picked the perfect time to take a fucking vacation." Declan nods, his relief palpable.

Once at the end of the tunnel, we arrive at a ladder with a trap door over top of it. Carter climbs to open it, pulling himself up. My breath freezes in my chest at having him out of my sight. I push through the guards that are at the bottom of the ladder, and I climb up myself, wanting to set eyes on Carter to make sure he's okay.

He holds out his hand and I grab it so he can pull me up the rest of the way. I kiss him quickly, my heart still thumping hard in my chest. "You okay?"

"No. They're probably slaughtering our men and there's nothing we can do about it."

"Yes there is. We can kill them all."

When everyone is out of the tunnel and the door is closed, Carter slides a heavy beam over the covering. "If they find this place, they won't be able to get through. Not without making the whole building cave in on them."

The interior of the building we came out in looks nothing like any shed I've ever seen before. It's the size of a five-car garage, with three large SUVs parked inside. The walls are bare, save for the keys for the cars. There's enough space for us all to fit comfortably, but not room for much else. The floors are concrete and dirt, appearing almost unfinished.

Gavin, Nico and another one of the Whitlock men run over to the wall and grab the keys. If the SUVs fit eight people, we have just enough room for everyone to fit, even though it will be a tight squeeze.

After we quickly figure out the logistics of how we'll travel, we pile into vehicles. Declan said it's best if me and Carter ride separately, but neither of us was worried about that.

"I have a place right outside of Yorkley," Declan says. "No one knows about it." He looks at the two of us, his eyes boring into his brother's. "Drive straight there. Don't pass fucking go, Carter. You hear me?" Carter nods. Declan rattles off the address and Carter punches it into the GPS. Forty minutes away.

As soon as the doors of the shed open, all three SUVs shoot off, driving at a quick clip. None of us slow down until we're about ten minutes out from Declan's place.

The whole ride, I run through what has to be done. The Fensters will hurt for all the shit they're doing. For killing Pop, for desecrating his grave and for almost killing us. I won't rest until every single one is in the fucking ground.

"There's only one way into my place out here," Declan says through the open phone connection we have with him. "Surrounded by a lake and forests. Equipped with motion sensors in the woods and around the house. If someone tries to come down that road, we'll know and we'll be ready."

As soon as we pull up in front of Declan's house, we're ushered inside and all the men that came with us besides Hendrix, Nico and Gavin stand outside the house, guarding us.

We all sit around a large table, no one saying anything for a few minutes.

Hendrix runs a hand over his low fade, his dark brown skin flushed with anger. "This is fucking bullshit. How are we going to pay those cocksuckers back for an attack like this?"

Carter and I make eye contact. I'm sure he's thinking what I am. Whatever we plan, it has to be big. Big enough so no Fensters remain. And it has to send a message.

"I'm tired of being on the defensive," I say, my anger rising again. "They fucked on top of my father's grave and pissed all over it. I want them fucking dead. Yesterday."

"How do you want to do that?" Declan asks, shooting me a flat look.

I reach behind my back and pull out my gun, slamming it on the table. "With this. We go to wherever they are, and fucking cut them down. Sam,

Gabbi and Anthony are always together. It shouldn't be too hard to find them." When no one says anything, I push back from my chair and pace, pulling at my hair. "I'm not going to continue to run from them. Today was the last time. So, let's fucking figure something out. No one leaves until we do."

Putting his hands behind his head, Carter looks at me with a soft expression that threatens to blow away my anger like so many leaves in the breeze. "Let's get started then."

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CHAPTER 24



CARTER

y combat boots crunch leaves underfoot as I run across the lawn of Anthony Fenster's safe house. The weather is turning, cold air breezing past me as I duck behind a car to avoid being seen, but I don't feel the chill. Today is the day of reckoning for the Fenster family.

Declan worked for days, trying to find where the Fenster's could be hiding. He checked every business and alias for everyone in their inner circle and got a hit with Gabbi's. There was an LLC placed under her middle name, with only this property as a holding. Declan flew a drone over the house and saw it swarming with guards and caught a glimpse of Sam walking the grounds.

A shout rents the air, followed by screams and guns being discharged. The sound of shooting echoes around me, but we have the element of surprise. None of the Fensters expected us to bring the fight to them, especially in broad daylight. After pulling in a deep breath, I move from behind one of the cars, Declan, Hendrix, and Gavin hot on my heels.

Our men got to the door already and kicked it in, the bodies of the men guarding it littering the floor. I step over them and raise my AR, aiming at the chest of a man that rounds the corner that leads to the kitchen. I pump him full of lead and continue to move through the house before his body drops.

"I'm going left," Declan says, and he and Hendrix split off from me and Gavin. I take the stairs two at a time, heading to Anthony's office.

Declan found the floor plans for this house, so we're not going in blind.

Gunfire reaches my ears from the floor below. I hope it's not someone shooting at Kai. We agreed to split up to cover more ground and lessen the chances of both of us being killed today. I wish I had eyes on him, but I know it's smart for us not to be together. If he has any injuries at all, I will fucking—

A bullet whizzes past my head and embeds itself in the wall behind me. I drop to the floor, rolling behind a stone pillar. I curse myself for not paying attention. I need to keep my eyes open and my head in the game if I want to return to Kai. With more force than I thought I needed, I push thoughts of him from my mind for now.

Popping my head out, I bring up my gun and fire off several rounds. The person that shot at me drops to the floor, a high-pitched scream leaving her mouth.

Gabbi.

I swore when I saw her, I'd kill her myself.

Getting to my feet, I shout at Gavin, "Find Sam and Anthony if you can. But don't kill them. They're for me and Kai."

He nods and takes off down a hallway, dodging bullets that Gabbi is still firing. When she curses and I hear the sound of her gun clicking, I dodge out from the pillar, firing at the men that come out of a room behind her. A bullet grazes my arm, but I ignore the sting and put them both down with bullets to their foreheads. Blood and brain matter paint the wall behind them as their bodies drop with a thud.

She tries to scramble away, rolling to the side to grab one of their weapons, but I'm on her before she can, kicking the gun out of her reach. She shouts a curse at me, holding on to her arm. It's the one I shot, wrapped in bandages and bleeding profusely. She must have ripped her stitches. It probably hurts like a bitch.

Grinning down at her, I step on the wound, listening to her cries. "Not much fun when you're on the receiving end of bullets huh?"

She glares up at me, anger flashing in her eyes. "Fuck you, Whitlock. We're not done with you yet. You haven't won. We'll—"

I put a bullet between her eyes before she can issue her next threat.

With one Fenster dispatched, I hurry back down the stairs, jumping back into the fray of the gun fight.

Bodies litter the ground, some ours, but most the Fensters. I step over them, looking down to make sure none of them are Kai. I do a double take when I see Hendrix laying by what was labeled as the sitting room, a wound in his chest and one in his forehead. I search around frantically for Declan, but don't spot him.

Most of the shooting sounds as if it's coming from the garage and mudroom, so I jog in that direction.

A bullet grazes my leg, and I hiss. I turn around and drop to one knee and fire at the man who shot at me. His head explodes and he drops against the wall, leaving a trail of blood and brains behind as he slides down to the floor.

My left arm and right thigh sting, but they're flea bites. Now that I got my kill, I want to find Kai so we can take care of the rest.

When I step into the garage, it's fucking chaos. Men are hiding behind any kind of coverage they can get, and bodies are everywhere. From my vantage point, I can see both Sam and Anthony taking cover behind a mid-sized sedan, bullet pinging off the surface—it must be bulletproof. But even with my position, I can't get a good shot of them.

Gazing around, I see Kai kneeling behind another sedan, firing off round after round of bullets in the direction of Anthony and his men. He's holding his own, but how long can that last?

One of my guys rushes down the hallway and I whistle to him. He jogs over. "Count to thirty, then open the garage door." I point to the garage door opener. He nods, standing against the wall to take cover.

I rush to the front door, shooting any man I encounter. I take a slug to the calf that sends me to the floor, but I recover quickly. Before I can fire at the man that shot me, blood gushes from his neck and he twirls around before falling to the floor. Covered in blood practically from head to toe, Declan walks up to the man and plugs two more bullets into his face.

A sigh of relief leaves me when I see my little brother. He looks a little worse for wear, but he's alive. I pull him in for a quick hug, exhaling roughly. "Glad you're good. Sorry about Hendrix."

He nods and pushes me away. Even in a situation like this, he's not into public displays of affection. "Yeah, thanks. Where are they?"

"Follow me." I limp outside, not wanting to put too much weight on my leg.

Declan and I grab another man we encounter on our way out and wait by the garage door. A few moments later, it starts to rise. We fire a few shots into the garage before the door rises completely. With the sound of gunfire in the enclosed space, the Fensters don't know we're there until they're hit.

"Fuck!" Anthony exclaims, holding his leg. I shoot at his gun hand before he can raise it up to fire at us. The other people around him are dispatched quickly, including the woman that fucked Sam on Charlie's grave. Blood flows down the driveway, like a river of red pooling around my feet.

Declan and the other man that joined us, Bruce, moves through the garage quickly, killing the Fenster men that didn't notice us. It takes less than thirty seconds for them to clear the garage of Fenster men. Bruce and a few other men go back into the house to clear it of other men while Kai, Declan, Nico, and Gavin rush over to me.

Nico, Gavin and Declan hold a gun to Sam and Anthony while I hug Kai tightly. I let out a shuddering breath when I have him in my arms, safe and whole. I pull back to look him over. He has a scratch under his eye and he's holding his wrist close to his chest.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Fell down the stairs. Landed wrong. Probably just a sprain though." He looks down at my leg and growls. "Someone shot you?"

Declan chuckles, but it sounds empty. "I killed him for his trouble. Sorry." Declan doesn't sound sorry at all. "He killed Hendrix."

It makes sense why he plugged him more than once.

Anthony looks up at us with fire in his eyes. "Fucking St. Clair's and Whitlock's. Didn't think you had it in you." He hisses when he tries to get to his feet. Declan shoots him in the opposite leg, making him crumple to the ground. "Hold up. Wait. We can talk about this."

Kai extracts himself from my arms, taking several steps closer to Sam and Anthony. "You fucked on my father's grave," he says to Sam. To his credit, Sam just eyes him, not backing down. "And you pissed on it after your scumbag son jerked off on the headstone. There's nothing to fucking talk about."

With that, Kai turns his gun and shoots Sam three times in the chest. Anthony cries out, dragging himself over to his gasping son. He cradles Sam's head in his lap, rocking back and forth. We all watch as Sam drags in a shuddering breath, then goes still.

Limping over to them, I kneel beside Anthony who looks devastated. I want to add salt to the wound. "Gabbi is dead. I put a bullet between her

eyes myself." His face turns stormy, and he swipes at me. But I move back, dodging his fist effortlessly. "We took your whole family. Now we'll take your fucking empire. You fucked up when you targeted us."

Standing, I aim at Anthony's forehead and let off three rounds. His head kicks back and his skull explodes.

Pulling out my phone, I snap a picture and send it to Dad. He wanted to come with us, but he's not as young as he used to be. I'm not saying he would have slowed us down, but he would have been a liability. Kai lost Charlie and he went half out of his mind, and he didn't even like his dad. I knew if I lost my father, I'd scorch the fucking earth in my anger.

Declan points to a few cans of gas that we placed by the sheds and some of our guys run over and grab them. They started a path from the garage back inside the house, some going through the front door and around the house. A few gunshots can be heard, probably our guys killing anyone that's still alive.

Once they're done spreading the gasoline, they come back out, tossing the cans inside the house, crowding around us. Wrapping an arm around Kai's shoulders, I kiss his temple, whispering that I love him as we walk away. He returns my affection, brushing his lips across my cheek.

When we get about fifty yards from the house, I turn to Declan and tell him, "When we get to our cars, blow it up."

Last night, when we figured out the floor plan and got our weapons together, Declan suggested he and a few of the guys rig explosives to the house after they planted the gas cans. Either we were going to get out alive or we'd take everyone down with us. All around the perimeter of the house, there are enough explosives to level the entire house. Security was more lax than it should have been, so they got everything done and the Fensters were none the wiser.

We're hoping with the explosion and the gas we spread across every surface of the house, the bodies and all evidence will be burned away.

It takes us about five minutes to get to our cars, then Declan pulls a remote from his pocket and presses a button. The sound is deafening, causing all of us to slam our hands over our ears. The plume of fire and smoke rise high in the air. Hopefully by the time first responders arrive, everything will be burnt to ash.

I climb into the back of the SUV, pushing myself against the door of the car. Kai slides in beside me, drawing my leg over his thighs. I hiss when he

pulls my pants from the top of my boots and draws it up my leg.

He turns my leg to the side, examining it as the car starts rolling. We gain speed, flying down the road to put as much distance between us and the house we just blew up as we can.

Kai pokes and prods at my leg. I have to grit my teeth to keep from yelling. "Looks like a through and through," he says tightly. "You have an entrance and exit wound, so it won't be too hard to patch you up."

I nod. We anticipated having some injuries when we returned. Our family doc is waiting at Dad's house. From what I saw, a few of the men are worse off than me, so they'll be seen first. All I need is a few stitches and some antibiotics and I'll be good to go.

Sighing, Kai slides closer to me, planting his lips against mine. "I was fucking worried about you. If something like this happens again, I'm not leaving your side. Got it?"

Nodding, I pull him closer to me, kissing him harder. "It won't. I could hardly think because I was worried that you were hurt, and I couldn't help you. I just about went fucking crazy."

An hour later, we're back at Dad's house. He and two people in scrubs stand outside, waiting for us to park. When Declan gets out of the car, Dad rushes over to him, hugging him and checking him over. As far as I can tell, Declan is unhurt, besides a few scratches.

When Kai and I step out, Dad narrows his eyes. "I should have known two of my boys would have been hurt, but I had money on Declan and Carter. You surprised me, Kaison."

Kai laughs, walking over to Dad. "Just a sprain. Nothing too bad." He twists his wrists in a circle. He winces but has full range of motion.

His arm around my waist, Kai helps me inside the house, keeping the weight off my leg. One of the men in scrubs comes over to me, his rough hands twisting my leg back and forth.

Kai plants a large hand on his shoulder, squeezing until the man cries out. "Be fucking gentle with him or I'll kill you next."

The man bats his hand away, but I can see the fear in his eyes. "I got it." He goes back to working on my leg, without the man handling.

He numbs me up so he can check to make sure there are no more fragments in my leg, then sews me up. Ten stitches on each side, two antibiotics and some pain pills later, I'm done and allowed to relax.

The other doctor assesses Kai's wrist, deeming it a sprain and gives him a brace to wear for a few weeks.

"Take him upstairs," Dad says to Kai. "His old room is ready for him. He needs to rest."

I'm starting to feel loopy, my head swimming from the effects of the meds. I feel safe being medicated because I know Kai will watch over me, making sure nothing happens to me.

"Come on, babe," he whispers, helping me to my feet. "You need rest."

"Stay with me," I murmur back, leaning my head against his shoulder.

Usually, it's me that comforts Kai, holding him up when he wants to fall. It's nice to have him be my rock right now. He's warm and solid, able to hold my weight with ease.

"Always," he whispers back, kissing my temple.

Today was a real bitch. I didn't expect to bring everyone back, but I didn't expect so little of us to return. Now I see why other families don't want or can't handle repeated war. It's too much. Too many people die and it's a lot of work and effort to rebuild a family.

Having the St. Clair's made it easier for us to handle, but I can't deny that we suffered some heavy losses today. Men in our inner circles, Dad's right hand man, Declan's and a few of the younger men are a pile of ash back at the Fenster safe house. None of them will be able to get a proper burial. But I'll do right by them and take care of their families, whether they belong to the Whitlocks or the St. Clair's. After today, we're all family.

Kai pushes into my old room and walks me over to the large canopy bed. "Pretentious," he murmurs with a smile in his tone.

"Fit for a king," I joke back, my words slurring.

He strips me of my clothes, pushing me to the center of the bed in just my underwear. After removing his own clothing, he climbs in behind me, wrapping his arm around my middle. "Declan and Dominic are taking care of security shifts. None of us will go unguarded. We're safe, Carter." I sigh, pushing back against him to get more of his warmth. "It's over. We won the war."

My eyes feel heavy, and it takes effort to open them for even a few seconds. "We did. I'm glad you're safe, Kai. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

He presses a kiss to my shoulder. "You won't have to find out. I'm not going anywhere. I love you, Carter."

A smile touches my lips as my eyes drift shut. "And I love you, pretty baby," I manage to reply before sleep claims me.

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CHAPTER 25



CARTER

t takes about a month for me and Kai to get back to one hundred percent. I only needed meds that first night, since Kai, then the doctor poked at my leg, and it was burning and throbbing after the local anesthesia wore off. Doc told me to keep my weight off that leg, and I did...for a while. But I didn't want to be babied or baby myself. After Kai gave me shit, I did what I wanted.

"You're going to hurt yourself," he chided, watching me move around the house as if I wasn't shot. "You need to rest."

Like he listened himself. The day after shit went down, Kai took the brace off his wrist and tossed it on my nightstand, forgetting about it as if it didn't exist. He's such a fucking hypocrite. I told him as much, and he only smiled and replied, "I wasn't shot in the wrist."

Since my house was blown to shit, we ended up staying with Dad. Declan offered his place, but there wasn't enough room for all of us in his two-bedroom condo. I have Gavin with me and Kai has Nico. Neither of them would have settled for sleeping on the couch when Dad has about six spare rooms. Besides, the empty room Declan has was Hendrix's. Kinda creepy to sleep with a dead man's shit around me.

His safe house was also out, since it was in the middle of fucking nowhere. It was good in a pinch, but staying out there for weeks on end? Nah.

Kai and I have been drawing up plans to get my house rebuilt. He's really good at it, offering suggestions that would expand on the house I

already had. Like having retractable black out curtains that close automatically when the sun goes down and open at whatever time we set them for. It will solve the problem of me getting irritated when the sun shines in my face from all the damn windows I want.

While we work to get plans drawn up for our new house, as well as get back to business, Kai and I talk. It's like being in a shoot-out has made us closer and our relationship has grown stronger.

When I feel like I can put weight on my leg without pain, I plan a date with Kai. We have nothing to worry about as far as being attacked and can move freely. The two dates we had before—bringing him lunch at his construction company and our fair date—were great, but if he was anything like me, Kai still felt as if we had to constantly look over our shoulders. Now that the Fensters are dead, we're as safe as we can be for two mafia bosses.

Walking into my childhood bedroom where Kai is lying in bed sketching, I climb in beside him and move the sketch pad. "The fuck, Carter?" he grumbles, giving me the hairy eyeball.

Smiling, I blanket him with my body and plant a long kiss on his lips. Kai groans, lying down more on the bed and threading his fingers in my hair. Left up to me, we would roll around in bed all day, relearning each other's bodies. Since shit went down with the Fensters, Kai and I have been fucking quick and furiously, just trying to get each other off. But we need to take time to actually make love. I want to praise his body, kiss and lick him everywhere, taste him everywhere.

Today, however, is not that day.

Pulling my lips away, I kiss one of his flushed cheeks. "Get in the shower with me. I want to take you out."

"It's late," he says, grabbing his phone from beside him on the bed.

"So?" I kiss him again, thrusting my tongue into his mouth. It takes all my self-control to pull away and sit back on my heels.

He waggles his eyebrows. "Are we taking this to the shower?"

Barking a laugh, I shake my head and pull him off the bed. "No. We have plans, and I want to make sure we make them." We head to the shower, and I wash him delicately, tracing the lines and curves of his body. "You're fucking beautiful," I tell him, kissing his sudsy shoulder. "I'm a lucky man."

Kai chuckles. "Yeah you are." I slap his round ass, making him yelp and sock me in the shoulder.

We're out of the house twenty minutes later, Dad giving me a side eye when he sees Kai in his suit while I have on my t-shirt, black jeans, and combat boots. Kai likes me in a suit, but I know he likes it when I'm myself too.

I get behind the wheel of the car and I point us in the direction of The Devil's Den. I'm sure Kai will have questions, but I don't plan to answer them until we get there.

Ever since Kai told me he's into exhibitionism, it's been in the back of my mind to watch. I don't want anyone fucking him—his ass belongs to me and only me—but Kai is vers. I would love to watch him plowing someone while I had a front row seat.

Most people wouldn't want to watch their partners fuck someone else, but it's all I can think about. Visions of him pounding a certain twink into the mattress assailed me more times than I could count.

As I expected, Kai's eyebrows scrunch and he looks at me sharply. "What is this?"

"A date, pretty baby." After I put the car in park, I lean over and kiss him. "You ready?"

"I guess. I've never been tied up before," he says almost nervously.

I hum, knowing he thinks we're coming here to play since we're still in Dad's house. Though he has his own corner of the mansion, Kai and I have kept our usual noises to a minimum. In a club like The Devil's Den, he can be as loud and as vocal as he'd like.

But tonight, it's not about satisfying my kink. It's about his.

I drag him into the club, letting the bouncer search us and the front of house attendant take our prints. We're welcomed admittance and beeline to the bar.

"I'll be right back," I tell him, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "Order me a Coke while I use the restroom."

He nods and blushes when I plant my lips on his cheek again. I round the corner to the restroom, but don't actually use it. I want to watch him. I want to see what it's like to watch men fawn over him, to have them touch him and see him reject each and every one.

A few come over and I see Kai give them all a hard look before they get the hint and walk off. I'm sure if we were anywhere else, he would have shot them, but he's on his best behavior here.

Pity. I like watching him kill.

To my surprise, the man I was looking for walks up behind me. "Hey." I turn around to see Tiny Twink, as Kai called him. "Um. Are you here to ...I don't know. Am I in trouble?"

Smiling down at him, I shake my head. "No. You got our tip, right?"

As Kai asked, I sent Tiny Twink a twenty-thousand-dollar tip for taking care of Kai. When he woke up the day after he ran off, Kai told me everything that happened while he was sober. He really took care of Kai. It should have been me, but my husband left without a way for me to do that.

Tiny Twink's face brightens and he nods. "That was from you? Wow, thank you."

Grabbing his hand, I pull him beside me. "Do me a favor?" He nods again. "Go and flirt with my husband. Then take him back to a room."

He looks up at me apprehensively. "Is this a test? Like, will you try to beat me up if he comes with me?"

I laugh and shake my head. "No. You can tell him I asked you to take him to a vacant room."

Although he shoots me a nervous look, he says, "Okay. A blue light will be illuminated over the room we'll be in. I'll leave the door unlocked." With that, he saunters over to Kai. Kai's face lights up and he turns around to talk to Tiny Twink. My cock stirs in my pants as I watch them together. Kai's large, powerful body beside the cute, smaller man is a sight to behold. I can only imagine how they'll look when Kai is balls deep in him.

From where I am, I watch as Kai shakes his head when Tiny Twink—Kai said his name was Jamie—takes his hand. When he leans in to whisper something in his ear, Kai looks around. I blend back into the darkness so he can't see me. When I peak back around the corner, they're gone.

I count to twenty, then walk down the hallway where the private rooms are. I smile when I see the blue light illuminated over the room he bought Kai to when he was drunk.

Squaring my shoulders, I step inside, seeing Kai standing as far from Jamie as possible, while still carrying on a friendly conversation. Oh, my dear husband. He doesn't know what I have planned for him.

When his eyes meet mine, a slow smile stretches his face. "Babe. Hey."

Crooking my finger, I gesture for Jamie to come over to me. Hesitantly, he does, coming to stand beside me. Snaking out my arm, I pull the smaller

man closer to me. I smile when Kai narrows his eyes at where I have my arm wrapped around Jamie's waist.

Trailing soft fingers down Jamie's neck, I hear his sharp intake of breath as I look at my husband. "He's hot as fuck, right?"

Kai clenches his jaw, but nods.

"You want him." Not a question. Kai and I almost came to blows over him.

"Carter—"

"You do."

Jamie blows out a shuddering breath. "What is this?"

I drift my hand down Jamie's torso and leaning close to his ear, I ask, "Would you let my husband fuck you? Answer me honestly."

"Yes," Jamie whispers.

"Good. Show me." I nudge him closer to Kai and pull up a chair to watch the show.

"Carter," Kai says again. "Are you—"

"I want to watch you fuck him, Kaison. Put on a show for me, pretty baby."

Realization creeps into Kai's eyes and he beams at me. "You sure?"

"Very. But first, come here." He walks over to me, and I pull him down to my mouth, sucking on his tongue. I only let him go when he's panting against me. "Now go have some fun."

Kai gives me one more lingering kiss, then turns to Jamie. He pulls the smaller man against him, lowering his mouth to his. Before their lips meet, he looks at me. "Is this okay?"

"Do whatever you would do if I were a stranger."

After shooting me another grin, he asks Jamie the same question. When the smaller man nods, Kai captures his lips in a greedy kiss. Jamie moans, thrusting his hands into Kai's long waves and pulls against the strands.

My cock lengthens in my pants as I watch them together. I love watching Kai take control, especially because he gives it up so easily when he's with me.

Initially, when I was planning to bring Kai here to watch him fuck, I worried I'd get jealous, upset that someone else had his attention. But even while he's kissing and touching Jamie, he keeps looking at me, checking in with me. Watching them touch and kiss has my dick throbbing and my balls aching.

Kai grabs Jamie under the ass and picks him up off his feet. Jamie locks his legs around Kai's waist, holding on to his neck while Kai kisses him deeply.

While Kai lays Jamie on the bed, I walk over to the small table in the room where condoms and lube are. I put both on the bed beside them, so they don't have to move from where they are.

They separate only long enough to strip out of their clothing. Jamie has a nice fucking body. Even dark skin, a slim, but lightly muscled build, and a cock that's bigger than I would expect on a man his size. I bite my bottom lip as I watch him and Kai move against each other, their size difference hotter than any of my fantasies.

"Can I...suck you?" Jamie pants when Kai releases his lips and kisses down his throat. He doesn't mark him up like he would me, and I appreciate that. He's saving a bit of himself for me, even though I'm giving him free reign to do whatever he wants to Jamie.

This has to be one of the hottest things I've ever seen. I am possessive of my pretty baby. He belongs to me. But watching him with someone else, especially when I know how much he loves it, sends fire blazing through me, going straight to my dick.

Kai nods against his neck, kissing and licking at him for only a moment more before he rolls to his back, his dick sticking up straight in the air.

Jamie shimmies down, gasping when he sees Kai's cock. It is a work of art, second only to his nice round ass. He pumps Kai for a moment, watching in awe as his cockhead peeks out from his uncut cock on every downstroke. The purple head of him looks swollen and it's weeping, like it's begging for either attention or release.

Humming, Jamie opens his mouth and takes Kai in slowly, his tiny jaw unhinging like a fucking snake as he widens his mouth to take him all.

Kai looks over at me, his eyes lust drunk as he takes me in. His eyes drop to where my dick is straining against my pants, then meets my gaze again. "You like what you see?"

Leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees, I nod. "Fuck yes. You don't know how fucking good the two of you look together. If I take my dick out now and jerk off, I'll blow my load before you can drive your dick into him and fuck him into the mattress."

Jamie whimpers, bobbing up and down on Kai's dick faster, slurping noises filling the room. His thick ass is propped high in the air, and I can

imagine how it would jiggle as Kai pounds into him.

I watch as Kai's wet cock slides down Jamie's throat. He doesn't gag or sputter, taking his whole dick like a champ.

Fuck it, I can't wait until they start fucking. The show is too good.

Reaching into my pants, I pull out my rock-hard cock and stroke it slowly. I groan when I thumb over my cockhead, collecting the precum from my tip. I use the small bit of moisture to jerk myself while I watch my husband get off.

Kai throws his head back and moans, rolling his hips into Jamie's face. He sounds fucked out already. His hands go to the back of Jamie's head, urging him to suck faster. Jamie takes direction well, speeding up how he takes Kai.

Just when I think Kai will unload in Jamie's mouth before he can fuck him, Kai pulls his dick from between his lips, pulls Jamie up his body and kisses him hard. My dick throbs in my hand, but I stop stroking. I squeeze myself at the base, not wanting to shoot off just yet.

"Stretch yourself," Kai tells Jamie, pressing the bottle of lube into his hand. "Stretch your ass so my husband can watch while I suck his cock."

Jamie moans, bending down for one more kiss before he climbs off Kai. He turns away from me, his thick ass pointed in my direction. I watch with rapt attention as Jamie's thin fingers coated with lube play around his hole, getting himself slick. I only snatch my eyes away from that tantalizing sight when Kai gets off the bed and crawls over to me. His powerful body, shifting as he makes his way over to me is a sight I'll never regret seeing.

When he's in front of me, he smiles widely, then leans up to kiss me hard. "Thank you," he whispers against my lips.

"Anything for you, Kaison."

Aiming one more smile at me, he moves my hand from my shaft and replaces it with his mouth. "Hmm, fuck," I grunt, lifting my head so I can watch Jamie stretch himself for Kai's fat cock. Jamie three fingers deep, pushing back against the fingers that impale him. His soft mewls reach my ears, sounding sweet against my grunts and the greedy noises Kai makes while he takes me to the back of his throat.

Three, then four fingers slip into Jamie's hole. He curses and his body shudders. He glances back at me and Kai, his mouth open as he pants. "Oh god," he murmurs, moving his fingers faster into his hole. "You two...holy fuck. So fucking sexy. I could watch you all day."

I'm so close to blowing my load, so close to coming in Kai's mouth from his sucking and how Jamie's eyes glaze over from watching us. Everything about this experience is more than I thought it would be, hotter than I thought. My pleasure is heightened almost to the point of pain. All because I can give him what he craves.

I knew Kai loved to be watched. When we decided to make a go of our marriage, he probably believed he'd never get to indulge his kink again. I'm a possessive son of a bitch and love having Kai all to myself, but above all that, I love making Kai happy. I would have fucked him in front of everyone else, but I like how he gives himself over to me when we're alone. When we're together, just me and him, that's for us. No one gets to see how eager he is to please me. That's for my eyes only.

When my orgasm is at the tip of my dick, I weave my fingers into Kai's hair and pull him off. "Go fuck him, pretty baby. I want to see you balls deep inside him."

Jamie removes his fingers, then turns to the head of the bed, on his hands and knees with his ass in the air. After planting a messy kiss on my lips, Kai rises from his knees and walks over to the bed. He climbs behind Jamie, kissing the ridges of his spine. Jamie sighs sweetly, his mouth open and his eyes roll to the back of his head. They snap open when he hears the rustling of my pants as I shift in my chair.

"Wanna join?" he asks, panting.

I shake my head, grinning at him. "Not this time. I want to watch you take my husband's cock. Think you can?"

He nods, a dirty smile on his face. "Yeah, I can."

Kai leans back and slaps Jamie's ass hard. When Jamie moans, he slaps the other cheek. He quickly rolls the condom down his shaft. "We'll see. Safe word?"

"Red," Jamie moans, pushing back against his sheathed length. "Stop light system is standard here." Both Kai and I know that, but like me, Kai asked just in case.

Grabbing the lube, Kai squirts some in his hand and coats his dick. With Jamie's hip firmly grasped in his hand, he rubs his dick over his hole, spreading the lube as well as teasing the man under him. Jamie mewls, sounding needy and so fucking sweet.

My cock pulses in my hand, begging for me to pump myself off as I watch them. But I know if I start too soon, I'll blow my load before they get

to the good part.

"Ready?" Kai asks.

"Please," Jamie begs, reaching behind himself and spreading his ass cheeks open for Kai.

Just before he slides home, Kai looks over at me. "Go on, pretty baby," I tell him, giving my dick a hard tug.

With agonizing slowness, Kai pushes inside Jamie's puckered entrance.

"Oh god," Jamie whispers, his eyes clamped down tight, heavy breaths sawing in and out of his chest. "All of it. I can take it."

Kai grins and shoves into him on a long thrust. Jamie's back arches and he cries out. Tears appear on his face, but he looks fucking blissed out.

Holy fuck. Seeing him impaled on Kai's dick has my cock leaking, begging for release. I knew they'd look good together, but I didn't bank on them being so fucking combustible. Kai's large hands clamped on Jamie's narrow hips, his large thighs bracketing Jamie's slimmer but toned legs, that fat fucking ass pressed back against Kai's hips. It's too fucking much. If I'm not careful, I'll fucking blow.

"Fuck him, pretty baby," I practically beg, needing to see them together. I fear I might have a heart attack if I wait too long.

Kai pulls his hips back and slams into Jamie, making the smaller man cry out. He holds there for a second, then repeats the motion. Over and over, he presses into the willing body under him in long, sure strokes. Jamie's moans are high and sweet, his hips winding as they roll back into Kai's thrusts.

They move fluidly together, pulling pleasure from the other. Kai gives him the praise and attention I give him, making Jamie his sole focus. But every few minutes, he looks over at me, watching as I watch them. He looks in fucking heaven, but like he's thinking about me the entire time. This is a gift for both of us.

My hand moves almost in a blur, unable to keep my orgasm at bay too much longer. They're too fucking hot together and I can't stop the orgasm for barreling down on me.

"I'm close," Jamie says, his hand drifting under him to grasp at his cock. He looks over at me, his hand moving at the same speed as mine. "Are you close?"

"Fuck yes," I answer in a voice I hardly recognize. "Kai?"

He puts his hand on the back of Jamie's neck, pushing him down until Jamie's shoulders hit the mattress. "Yes. Fuck. Carter, he's so fucking tight. I wish you could feel him."

Jamie makes a strangled noise, then his body convulses. Ropes of his cum shoots from his dick, coating the bed in front of him.

Kai's mouth opens in a long groan, and I watch his body shudder as he unloads in the condom. I'm not too far behind, my passion erupting from my dick to coat my hand.

Our moans of ecstasy fill the room as we all reach our peak practically at the same time. The smell of sex in the air keeps my orgasm going on longer than it normally would. Wave after wave of my release shoots from me, the floor a sticky mess at my feet.

After catching his breath, Kai pulls out of Jamie, then lays the smaller man on his side. "You okay?" he asks gently, wiping the sweat from Jamie's forehead.

Jamie nods, burrowing closer to Kai. Kai murmurs to him, rubbing his back in slow circles. I pull up my pants and go over to the table, grabbing some wipes and two bottles of water. I hand Kai the water so he can help Jamie drink some and I clean my dick, then clean the two of them up.

Kai helps Jamie come down from his high and I watch how tender he is, a small smile on my face. Jamie still looks lust drunk, and he'll probably crash if Kai leaves him. No matter how much I want to get Kaison home so we can cuddle, we have to take care of Jamie. Leaving him now could make him drop later and that shit isn't cool. Besides, he's a nice guy. Taking care of him is easy.

Twenty minutes later, Jamie's eyes are focused when he looks up at Kai, then me. "That was amazing. Thank you both for taking care of me."

"You're welcome," Kai says, kissing his forehead. Now that the sex is over, he has that distance between them that I noticed earlier. "You want to go home, or will you stay here to work a while? We can take you home."

"I'm going to go home, but I don't need a ride. I have a car."

I sit on the bed, rubbing his back. "You sure? That was an intense scene."

"I'm sure. I won't drop, I promise. I only stay a few minutes away."

Kai turns his chin so Jamie is looking at him again. "Do you need a few more minutes with me?"

Jamie nods and lies back on Kai's chest, sighing long and hard.

Kai looks at me, crooking a finger. I slide over, placing my lips on his. "Thank you, babe. I love you."

"Love you too."

A few minutes later, we help Jamie get dressed, walk him to the employee locker room where he puts on his street clothes, then walk him to his car. I'm not usually so attentive to the people I play with, besides giving them after care. But Jamie is so small and fragile, it's like he needs looking after.

He thanks us for walking him to his car and drives away, waving at us before he turns out of the parking lot.

Kai grins sleepily up at me. "Thank you," he says again. "You didn't have to do that. I would have been fine without being watched by anyone, you know that right?"

"I know." I place my hands on his ass, pulling him closer to me. "But I liked watching you. I can see the appeal for sure. If you want, we can come back and request Jamie. I think he's the only one I want to watch you fuck."

He nods, placing his head on my chest. "Join me next time. You'll like it."

I kiss him, groaning at how easily he surrenders to my control. "I think I will. Can't let you have all the fun."

He chuckles against my lips. "Greedy."

"When it comes to you."

Giving him one final kiss, I pull him with me to the car so we can go home. I need to give my pretty baby a shower and wrap him in my arms.

CHAPTER 26



KAI

t's been a week since our night at The Devil's Den and I'm still flying high. Carter and I have been even more insatiable than normal. If he didn't leave me so sore I could barely walk after we fucked, I'd have him inside me every day.

It seemed like ages ago that I asked him what he was doing at The Devil's Den and told him what I was into. He stored that information and gave me something I didn't think I'd experience again.

I love being married to him. I love having sex with him in private, my body only his for the viewing. But I won't lie and say that I didn't get off on Carter watching me fuck Jamie. It was hotter than all the sessions I had before. Times ten. Times fucking infinity. Feeling his gaze locked on me, on the two of us as we writhed around, and I pounded into Jamie's tight hole was too hot for words. Thinking back to Carter's face as he watched me got my dick hard as steel and my hole throbbing, begging for him to fill me.

Outside of fucking each other's brains out, we've been working on both our house and the casino. The construction of Indigo Arc has been moving apace, and we're gearing up to start working on the main floor redesign soon. I've had to hire more men to get it done, since I plan to do a major overhaul. The restaurant that was already there will be rebuilt, but I also bought the vacant land behind the casino so I can expand. It'll be a large undertaking, but I'm confident we can get it done.

We're hard at work in Dominic's second office when Gavin steps into the room. He looks at Carter and dips his head, then leaves. "What was that about?" I ask, watching Gavin's back.

"I have something for you," Carter says, taking the pencil out of my hand and setting it on the desk.

Smiling, I stand and press myself against Carter. The last time he had something for me, it was a night out so he could watch me fuck. "You seem to always surprise me with something. What is it this time?"

He chuckles, then plants a quick kiss on my lips. "You'll see. Come on. I've been working on this for months."

Now I'm really confused. Months ago, we didn't really like each other. What did he have up his sleeve?

Joking, I ask, "Is this where you kill me?"

Carter throws his head back and laughs. "You can't get rid of me that easily." He kisses my nose and I scowl, though I feel my cheeks heat. "I talked to Manuel." That gets my attention. Manuel guards the basement of The Fox Club with his life. He and Carter really got on when I had James downstairs for stealing my fucking money. "He's been guarding my gift for you."

If Manuel has to guard anything, that means it's someone that I can slice up. Giddiness flows through me. "Let's go then."

The drive to The Fox Club consists of me asking Carter who's in the basement and him telling me to stop trying to ruin his fucking surprise. As I take the familiar route to the club, I rack my brain to figure out who it could be. All of our enemies are dead, one I even killed myself.

Manuel and Carter clap hands when we get to the entrance of the basement door. Then he turns a grin on me, opening the door. "If I was into dudes," he says as the three of us trot down the stairs, "I'd want one like Carter."

The three of us laugh, though I'm not sure why he's saying it. What could Carter have possibly done to make someone as straight as Manuel think about bending a little?

Seconds later, I have my answer. Tied to chairs with duct tape on their mouths are the three men that robbed me outside of the club in Shell Village.

When their eyes land on me, initially all I see is fear. Following that emotion is surprise and more strongly, regret. That makes me smile.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," I say in an upbeat tone, removing my jacket and handing it to Manuel. "So glad you could join us today."

The ringleader, the handsome one that now has a long gash on his face, blanches. He says something behind his tape. Deciding to humor him, I walk over and snatch it off. He cries out, his lips trembling. I tilt my head, waiting for him to speak up. "Look man, we just wanted your wallet. We ain't know who you were."

I give him a flat look. "I tried to tell you, though. What did you say?" I put my hand on my chin, then snap my fingers as if I'm just remembering. "You said, 'Don't fuckin' care who you are."

The blood drains from his face and he starts babbling and begging like the other two, though their words are muffled.

I ignore them and turn to Carter. "How did you find them?"

He looks at the one with the shitty tattoo on his neck. "Found him first. Didn't take much. All Gavin had to do was hang out at the right nightclub. Then he snitched on the other two."

The other blond man and the man with the black hair glare at their friend. The snitch breaks down, tears streaking down his face. The sight is like the sweetest fucking ambrosia. I love it when they cry and beg. Makes the torture more fun.

I walk around the chairs, trying to decide which one I want to kill first. The one with the pockmarked face. He's the one that looped his arm through mine first. He led me to the other man that dragged me outside.

With that decided, I walk over to the roll of knives Manuel laid out for me. He leans against the wall, glaring at the men in the chairs.

"You know," I say to my audience, "I almost forgot about you asshats. I had bigger fish to fry. But my husband didn't forget." I select a butcher's knife, turning it this way and that, watching it glint off the light overhead. "You fucked with what belongs to him."

I turn around to see all three men exchange terrified glances. Black Hair swallows thickly. "What are you going to do?"

The look on my face must answer his question because the two blond haired men start to cry. But I answer anyway. "I'm not letting you leave here alive. You were on borrowed time when you grabbed me at the club."

Strangled cries and shouts from the men crop up in the room. I close my eyes, breathing in as their despair burrows deep inside me. Fuck yes. This is exactly what I need.

Before I get started, I flip the knife over and give it to Carter. "Want to take Lover Boy?"

He grins down at me, then kisses me hard. "Don't mind if I do. I actually have something. I told you torture is more my thing. Manuel, the bottle."

Manuel hands Carter a bottle with green liquid in it. I want to ask what it is, but I like Carter's surprises.

Carter steps up to the man with the trash tattoo on his neck. The man tries to lean away, trying to escape the sharp blade that Carter is holding, but it's no use. They're tied down tight with no means of escape.

Grabbing his hair, Carter pulls his head back and trails the knife down his throat, then to his chest. As he drags the knife down, he applies more pressure until the skin splits. Lover Boy thrashes, his body quaking as blood pours from his wounds. Then he makes three or four more cuts like this, not deep, but long.

"There," Carter says, almost soothingly. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" The man looks up at Carter as if he's lost his fucking mind.

Carter hands me the knife, then turns back to the man and sprays him with the liquid from the bottle. The man is silent for a few beats, then he screams behind the tape, his eyes bulging as he tries to wiggle out of the chair. Carter sprays him more, making tears leak from the man's eyes. The smell of the liquid reaches me, and I laugh hard enough for a few tears to stream down my face.

Rubbing alcohol.

Over and over, Carter makes cut after cut, then douses the man with rubbing alcohol. The man screams so hard and for so long, his eyes look to be protruding permanently. Then he starts coughing hard. Fluid oozes from around his tape and I know he's vomited.

Carter sighs, kicking the man over in the chair. "Figured he could take more before he threw up." Then he pulls out his gun and shoots him three times in the chest. After wheezing for a few seconds, the man goes quiet and still.

The two men left alive scream and look sick, though only Black Hair can be heard. "Enough," Manuel says, walking over to uppercut Black Hair so hard he flies back against the opposite wall, unconscious.

Flicking the knife in my hand, I walk over to the only conscious man. He looks at me fearfully, as if his life is flashing before his eyes. "Tell me," I taunt, tapping the knife against his forehead, "was it worth it? I had what? Three hundred bucks in my wallet? Was it worth your life?"

He shakes his head, tears leaking down his face. I jab forward and pierce the left side of his chest, then twist. He wheezes behind the tape on his mouth, his gaze flicking up to mine.

I remove the knife, stepping back before blood can splash on me. "The three of you beat my ass for three hundred dollars. Bet you didn't think your bullshit would come back to bite you in the ass, huh?"

With a quick flick of my wrist, I make a slice across his face so deep that I can see his teeth before blood gushes from the wound. Now that some of the tape is cut through, his screams become audible.

When I get behind him, I grab his forehead to expose his throat, then drag my knife from ear to ear. He quivers, then goes still as he bleeds out.

I look up at Carter and pass him the knife. He grins and takes it, then pulls me into his arms. "Fuck, Kai. Watching you work is such a fucking turn on." His hard dick presses into my thigh and I shudder. "When I get you home—"

"Why wait until we get home?"

Manuel makes a noise between a chuckle and a groan in the back of his throat. "I think that's my cue to leave. You two can handle one man on your own." He makes his exit as Carter cups my face and kisses me. "Hurry up and take care of him so I can suck you off."

An involuntary groan leaves my throat.

Turning to Black Hair, I see he's just started to stir, making pitiful whining noises. "Please," he whispers. "I'll leave town. I won't tell anyone what happened." His words are garbled, so I'm guessing Manuel broke his jaw. "I'm sorry, man. We just wanted money for coke."

"Was the coke worth it? Did you get a good high?" Carter asks, crossing his arms over his chest. Black Hair shakes his head miserably. "Didn't think so. You fucked with one of my possessions. I don't take kindly to that."

"Please." His voice is thick with tears.

Carter scoffs and bumps me with his shoulder. "Slit his throat. I'm tired of seeing his face."

Smiling slightly, I tip my head to the side. "I don't know, Carter. He's good looking. I quite like his face."

A loud growl fills the room, and I laugh. I knew that would get under his skin. Carter might be okay with watching me fuck a cute guy like Jamie, but looking at another man outside of that? He's not having it. "Get me the sharpest knife you have," he snarls. Another laugh bubbles up my throat as I pull out the boning knife and hand it to Carter.

I watch as he stalks over to the handsome black-haired man and slice all across his face. Flecks of blood flick on him, staining his hands and chest. The man cries out and tries to move away from what Carter is doing to him, but it's no use.

Carter is like fucking Picasso, painting the walls and himself with the blood of one of the men that would have ended my life if they didn't get my wallet.

His hand comes down over and over, the slashes deep and jagged. By the time he's finished, the man's face is a tattered mess of flesh, barely recognizable from the handsome man I encountered outside the club.

Exhaling roughly, Carter steps back and hands me the knife. "Finish it."

"Of course, babe," I say with a grin. I'm not sure where to grab the man's face to expose his throat, so I ram the blade into his chest, directly into his heart.

Before I can enjoy the kill, Carter grabs me and pushes me against the far wall. I hit it with a hiss, then Carter covers me with his body. His lips are hard and incessant on mine, licking into me roughly.

When I'm a panting mess against him, he pulls away, grabbing my hair and pulling my head back. "You don't notice men. No one but me. Understand?" I nod, moaning at his rough treatment and how jealousy deepens his voice.

Letting go of my hair, he makes quick work of undoing my pants and pulling them down my hips. He drops to his knees and sucks my cock into his mouth hands free. They're covered in blood and I'm sure he doesn't want to taste someone else on me.

My head flops back, banging into the wall as he sucks me in a fast, frantic pace. "Fuck, Carter. Fuck, I love you," I tell him, pumping my hips into his mouth.

He flicks his gaze up to me, heat burning in his eyes. I groan as I watch him take me in over and over, his lips stretched around my cock in an obscene way.

"I'm close." Carter is the only man that can bring me to the brink so quickly.

I bite my lip, watching arousal cloud his eyes. He moans around me, sending the vibration to my balls. "Carter. If you don't stop, I'm going to

come in your mouth."

Challenge enters his eyes. He doubles his efforts, taking me to the back of his throat and humming. "*Christ*," I groan and shoot down his throat before I can warn him. My body quakes, my release so powerful that my vision whites.

Getting to his feet after sucking my soul from my dick, Carter slams his mouth on mine again. The kiss tastes sweet and salty, our flavors mingling together beautifully.

When he pulls his mouth away, he rests his forehead against mine. "Shower as soon as we get home. I plan to eat your ass until you don't know your own name."

That's the kind of threat I can get behind. "Okay, babe."

"You look hot when you're killing people," he murmurs, helping me button my pants.

"I could say the same."

When I'm presentable, I knock on the door and Manuel steps inside, giving us sly smiles. "What's up, boss?"

"Get some men down here to clean this place up. Burn the bodies."

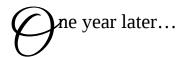
"You got it."

Carter and I clean up as best we can, then head home. I plan to claim my rimming reward as soon as we get out of the shower.

EPILOGUE



KAI



"YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?" Carter asks softly in my ear as he checks the scarves around my wrist. They're not tight enough where I can't get out of them, but they're secure enough that I'll have to put forth a lot of effort to slip them.

"Very sure. My safe word is squash."

Carter's warm breath fans over my ear as he chuckles. "I'll remember that." I feel movement on the bed, but I can't see that he's doing. The blindfold only allows me to see a tiny sliver of light, but not much else.

Ever since Carter gave me what I craved when I went to The Devil's Den, I've been trying to figure out when to return the favor. Luckily for me, it didn't require us going back to the club. But it did require us having our own place.

Staying with Dominic was nice, especially the weekly dinners. I still cooked as often as I could, but it was nice for an actual chef to make some masterpieces. But it limited what we could do in the bedroom. Dominic gave us sly looks, so I know he heard us sometimes when we were fucking. I can only imagine what he would think if he saw his son had tied me to his headboard. So being out of his house makes it much easier to do this.

We moved into our new home three nights ago and our bedroom furniture was delivered yesterday. The six bedroom, eight bath mini mansion is equipped with a basement gym with the same panic room and tunnel system Carter had in his old place. We also have a theater room right next door to our room, with an entrance that leads through, so we don't really have to leave the room to cuddle and watch a movie.

Nico and Gavin each have their own rooms on the bottom floor. It's basically like their own suite down there. They have free rein of everything down there, but we all share the kitchen. Unlike at Carter's old place, we plan to make good use of the pool, especially when it's warmer and we don't want to work out in the gym.

Carter's favorite part of his new place is the curtains. He bitched about the sun always streaming through his windows at his old place, but the fucker never bothered to get curtains. The retractable ones we have now shut him the fuck up on that front. He woke up this morning without complaining that if he could, he'd shoot the sun out of the sky. He's so cranky in the mornings.

One of Carter's hands drifts down my body, stopping briefly to lay over my heart. Right where the tattoo of his name is. The same artist that did all of his tattoos did mine. And the one that's over his chest with my full name. Kaison. I grin every time I see it, just as Carter does when he sees me shirtless. I'm his forever, just like he's mine.

I start slightly when his warm lips press against my tattoo. "You're mine, Kai. Branded with my name like you'll be branded with my marks before we're done playing."

"Yes," I groan, writhing against him.

He plants one more kiss to my chest before he turns me to my stomach with gentle hands. The scarves twist on my wrist, immobilizing me more. He lifts me until my ass is in the air, my arms crossed in front of me.

I love the sinful sound he makes when his hand trails from the top of my back down to my ass. He grabs a handful, kneading the round globes. "Did I ever tell you your ass was perfect?"

"Every day since we met," I joke in a panting voice. "You gonna do something with it?"

My breath comes out in a burst when I feel his wet tongue against my hole. He leisurely licks at me, taking his time to trail his tongue over the ridged skin of my pucker.

A curse leaves my lips as I push back more, trying to get his tongue inside. But Carter is content to tease me. My dick hardens more with each

swipe, bobbing and begging for attention. Carter doesn't touch me there either. He just laps at me slowly, getting my hole wet and soft.

"Carter, please," I beg, no longer ashamed of the action. In fact, it makes me feel good to give that piece of myself to him; I know he won't abuse it. He cherishes it when I give over that control. He takes care of me when I do.

He takes care of me even if I don't.

"In a minute," he whispers against my hole before going back in for another taste. "Let me eat you for a little while. I enjoy how you squirm for me." Carter dives back in for another swipe of his tongue, and I do just that. Puffs of air leave my throat as I pull against my bindings. I want out of them so I can touch him, so I can press his face deeper into my ass so he can make me come like this. But I like being at his mercy, so I don't try too hard.

He eats me out for another few minutes, until I'm a babbling mess, tears leaking from under my blindfold. God, I want to come. I want him to keep touching me. I want his dick in me.

After one more drag of his tongue, Carter moves away, no longer touching or licking at me. I whine, pulling at the bindings again. I strain my ears to try to figure out where he is, but he always moves silently.

Even though I can't see him, I can feel his eyes on me. It makes me feel hot, desirable. The ownership in his gaze makes my dick harder if that's possible.

A faint whirring noise fills the air, and I look around, trying to figure out where it's coming from and what it is. The sound is familiar, but I can't place it.

The bed dips behind me and Carter rubs lubed fingers around my hole. He slides them in gently, and I moan, throwing my head back. Carter hums, pushing his fingers deeper inside. When he curls them and hits my prostate, I about jump a foot off the bed.

"Yes, babe," I pant, wanting so much more.

His hand comes down on my ass sharply and I jump again but roll my hips into the pain. Another swat, then another, then another. My ass radiates with heat, but it feels so fucking good. Carter told me he was into impact play. This is the first time we've tried it for an extended period. He's spanked me during sex and knew I was into it, but this is next level. Fucking phenomenal.

"Feel good?" he asks, rubbing gently over my cheeks, soothing the ache from his swats.

"Yes," I groan. "More."

His fingers still tunnel inside me, bringing me indescribable pleasure. Just before I can roll off that cliff of my release, Carter pulls back, not giving me what I want.

"Carter. Please, fuck, please. Spank me again."

As I expected, Carter doesn't listen to me. He still plays with my ass, but he doesn't give me what I want. Such a tease.

When he has me half out of my mind with want, he removes his fingers. Almost immediately, he fills my ass with a vibrator. That's the buzzing I heard.

"Fuck," I groan, absorbing the toy and the vibrations. "Carter, oh god. Holy shit!"

His dark chuckle makes my dick throb. "I'm not done playing with you yet, pretty baby."

He climbs off the bed, leaving me fucking bereft at his absence. But he's not gone long. His fingers tangle in my hair when he climbs back on the bed in front, but to the side of me, and his cockhead brushes against my lips. I open my mouth and suck him down, moaning when his precum hits my tongue.

A moan rumbles deep in my chest as he pushes into my mouth, using my throat as a cock sleeve to get himself off. I wish I could see him while he fucks my mouth, wish I could gaze at him while he pumps into me furiously.

The toy in my ass keeps me on the edge and how he's thrusting into my throat has me so close to coming that the slightest touch will have me shooting like a fucking rocket.

But before I can get more into sucking him off, Carter pulls free from my mouth. The whine that tears from my lips is pitiful, but I don't wish to choke it back. I want more of his cock. I want to swallow him down. But Carter climbs off the bed again, moving behind me.

Another swat lands on my ass, jostling the toy in my hole. Many more follow. More than I can count. This time, he doesn't stop. The pleasure keeps mounting, higher and higher. "Carter. I'm going to come."

"Come for me, pretty baby. Let me see you explode."

Throwing my head back, I let go, coming hard enough to make my head throb. Carter talks me through it, soothing where he swatted my ass. His deep, melodic voice keeps my orgasm going, my dick kicking under me and painting the sheets with how much I enjoy this side of Carter.

Once my balls are empty, I sag onto the bed, barely able to keep my head up from the force of my release.

Carter eases the plug from my ass and turns me over onto my back. I'm lying in my own spend, but I don't care.

He settles between my legs and catches my lips in a sweet kiss. It's so tender that I fear I might tear up again from the saccharine feel of it. I wrap my legs around his waist, holding him any way I can. His tongue moves languidly against mine, almost distracting me from his cock burying deep inside me.

Almost.

I snatch away from his mouth and make an inhuman noise when he penetrates me, his thick cock stretching me way more than that vibrator ever could.

"Feel so fucking good, pretty baby," he croons to me as he rolls his hips. "I love how you moan for me. Love how you sound so unhinged for me." He pumps into me, dropping kisses all over my face. More tears of pleasure leak from my eyes and Carter licks them up. "Your tears taste good. Like every other part of you."

"Please," I whimper, meeting his unhurried strokes.

"I wish you could see how fucking perfect you look right now. How beautiful that round ass looks, red from my hands. Want to see, pretty baby? Hmm?"

"Yes, Carter. God, you feel...indescribable."

"That's all you." He licks a path up my neck, making me shiver.

He takes me slow, building my pleasure at a snail's pace. It's too good for words.

Right as I'm ready to explode for the second time, Carter removes my blindfold. I blink quickly, then lock eyes with him. His desire reflects back at me, and it sends me over the edge. Once again, I blow my load hands free, painting our bellies.

"Yeah, just like that," he says, watching my dick shoot between us. "That ass is squeezing my dick. Fuck, I'm coming, Kai."

He captures my lips in a greedy kiss as his strokes stutter and his body quakes. His hot seed spills into me, painting my walls, marking me as his.

Snatching his mouth away, his warm breath feathers over my lips when he asks, "You okay?"

I swallow thickly. "Yeah. I'm good. You?"

"Extremely pleased." His eyes sparkle as he looks up at my bindings. "Thanks for this."

"Anything for you, babe."

He reaches up and undoes the scarves. Taking my wrists into his hands, he rubs the feeling back into them. It was hot to be at his mercy that way. I can't wait to do it again.

After he's deemed the circulation is back, Carter rolls to the side, pulling me against him. He kisses my forehead. "We won't be able to do that when we have kids. You know that, right?"

Carter and I have been discussing getting a surrogate for kids. Adoption is an option as well, if we can't find someone we trust enough to carry our child. We've been going back and forth if we will have one or two. Carter says he'll give me whatever I want, including two kids, but our lives are busy, and he wants to ensure we can give our kids what they deserve as far as love and attention. Something I never got enough of.

After the war, I learned more about Charlie. Turns out, he and my mother were in a relationship, but she wasn't someone he wanted to marry. When she got pregnant, he paid her an obscene amount of money to get rid of me and to never darken his doorstep again. She obviously didn't listen. But she didn't want me after I was born, so she did what he told her not to do and left me with him.

I still have no desire to meet my mother. I've lived this long without her. She would in no way enrich my life.

In the year that he's been dead, I've made more connections with our drugs and guns sales. It seems like Pop was content to only deal with the few people that he started working with decades ago, even though other people reached out to do business. It's been hard making those connections, since most didn't trust me because of Pop. But it's worked out well. I'm making money hand over fist; and the Colombians I'm getting product from wholesale are happy campers with how much money they're getting from me.

Making those new connections made it easier for me to pay off the debts Pop had. I didn't get too many questions about paying the taxes too quickly because I was the owner of so many casinos and a construction company. I'm sure the IRS was eager to take the money and get me off their books.

Snuggling closer to Carter, I kiss at the side of his neck. "I know. But it'll be fine. Parents with kids find ways to fuck all the time."

The rumble of his chuckle makes me smile. "Yeah, let's just hope they don't walk in on me plowing your ass. They'd be traumatized."

I laugh, burying my face in his chest. "I bet." I stretch, feeling the drying cum on my back. "I need to get showered. I don't want to walk around with jizz on me all day."

Carter helps me out of bed and walks me to the bathroom. This bathroom looks just like the one from the other house, though it has two sinks instead of one. Carter drives me fucking crazy when he leaves toothpaste in the sink, and he bitches at me because he finds strands of hair in the drain. If we didn't get two sinks, we might have killed each other.

He turns me around to the mirror, smiling widely. "See how good you look?"

I peek over my shoulder, looking at my red ass. It *does* look good. Handprints cover me, large and imposing. It'll hurt to sit down for a few days, but I welcome the pain. It'll be a reminder of how Carter owned me so thoroughly.

"Can't wait to do this again," he says, kissing my shoulder.

After I stare at my ass for a few more seconds, we hop in the shower. We have a big night ahead of us.

Indigo Arc Casino and Restaurants ribbon cutting is in a few hours.

The construction of the casino and all the rooms Carter and I added in addition took close to a year. We had a few snags, with inclement weather and teenagers being dicks and trashing the place. A few broken limbs made them reconsider fucking with other people's shit.

But finally, it's ready for its grand re-opening. It's overwhelming to move into our new place as well as open the casino the same week, but I don't mind. As long as I have Carter by my side, I can do anything.

I tip my head back when we get in the shower, letting the water cascade down my back. Carter will bitch at me for my hair being in the shower, but whatever. I've let it grow longer this past year, the waves tumbling half down my back. Carter told me plenty of times how much he loved my hair and takes great pleasure in tugging on it all the time. He does it even more now that it's so much longer.

Turning me around, Carter washes my back, cleaning my cum off me. Then he dips down to my hole, washing me thoroughly.

"If we didn't have plans tonight," he says as he spreads me open more and runs my cloth over my hole, "I'd fuck you against this shower wall. Especially with your ass as red as it is from my swats."

I shiver, wanting the same thing. But if we get started again, we won't come up for air for the rest of the night.

We'll only have a few weeks downtime before Declan is opening his own casino. When we got rid of the Fensters, we absorbed their territory, which encompassed a few casinos, their furniture store, and a few nightclubs. Their property helped expand our territory and give our family more sway over most other families.

In the year since our short war, we've rebuilt our ranks, swelling our men past what we had before and are now the largest family in South Jersey. We're no longer seen as the St. Clair's and the Whitlock's separately; we're the St. Clair-Whitlock family and everyone knows our names.

The Fensters had some distant relatives that tried to come down and make waves for us. We sent them all back in body bags, until they stopped coming. We have no more enemies on that front.

With the Russians gone for good, their territory went to the Reyes family. We have reach, but we're not greedy. What we control is more than enough for us. Anything else would be too much and we wouldn't have as strong a hold on it as we'd like.

Twisting my head, I kiss Carter quickly. "Make sure you put on a suit tonight. Dominic will give you shit if you embarrass him by wearing combat boots to the fucking opening ceremony."

Since he turned over the family to Carter, Dominic has relaxed and started taking vacations. He's been doing all the things he didn't do while he was at war and dealing with his contentious relationship with my family. Now that the family is in good hands, he's living his best life.

Carter chuckles and finishes washing me. "I will. Jesus. If you or Dad tell me that shit again, I'll fucking scream."

"I like how you look with a suit on. With your dark hair and your tattoos, you look like a sexy, professional bad boy."

He gives me a droll look, making me laugh.

We finish up our shower after I wash Carter. At the sink, he grabs my brush and detangles the knots from my hair. Then he blows it dry for me. I love this domestic side of him, especially when he does it without me asking.

He loves taking care of me. And I love that he loves it. But I also have to give him shit for it.

"You're like a proper manservant, aren't you?" I ask with a teasing smile.

"If you want my help, you'll shut the fuck up with that shit." He might sound angry, but a grin plays at his lips.

It doesn't take us long to get dressed, Carter looking so fucking good in his suit. I enjoy seeing him in his combat boots, jeans and t-shirts that show every contour of his abs. But seeing him in a suit is a different sight to behold.

He looks over at me while putting on his cuff links. "What?"

"You're fucking gorgeous," I answer honestly.

He grins, ducking his head with a flush on his cheeks. I love making Carter blush. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, I treasure it.

After he finishes with his cuff links, he walks over to me. Framing my face with his large hands, he brings me in for a tender kiss. "You always take my breath away, Kaison. Sometimes, I want to thank our fathers for putting us together. You're the best thing in my life."

"As you are in mine. Looks like my Pop did something right."

He looks deeply into my eyes, a soft smile on his lips. "You'll be nothing like your father, Kai. You have love to give. You're warm. You're kind." He pauses then says, "Well, not really kind."

I laugh, slapping his arm. "Hey."

Carter laughs, then tips my head back so I can look at him. "Seriously. You'll be a great father. I'm glad I'm on this journey with you."

"Me too. I love you, Carter St. Clair-Whitlock."

"Not as much as I love you, Kaison St. Clair-Whitlock." He kisses me softly and I melt into him. "Forever."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RS McKenzie(she/her) loves love and enjoys writing books with men getting their HEA. Since she was a child, she loved writing poetry and short stories, showing them to her friends. When she's not writing, she's reading, listening to audiobooks or answering the endless questions her kid asks her.



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